TIMOTHY J. KELLER

A VISION FOR A GOSPEL CENTERED LIFE

A MONERGISM MONOGRAPH

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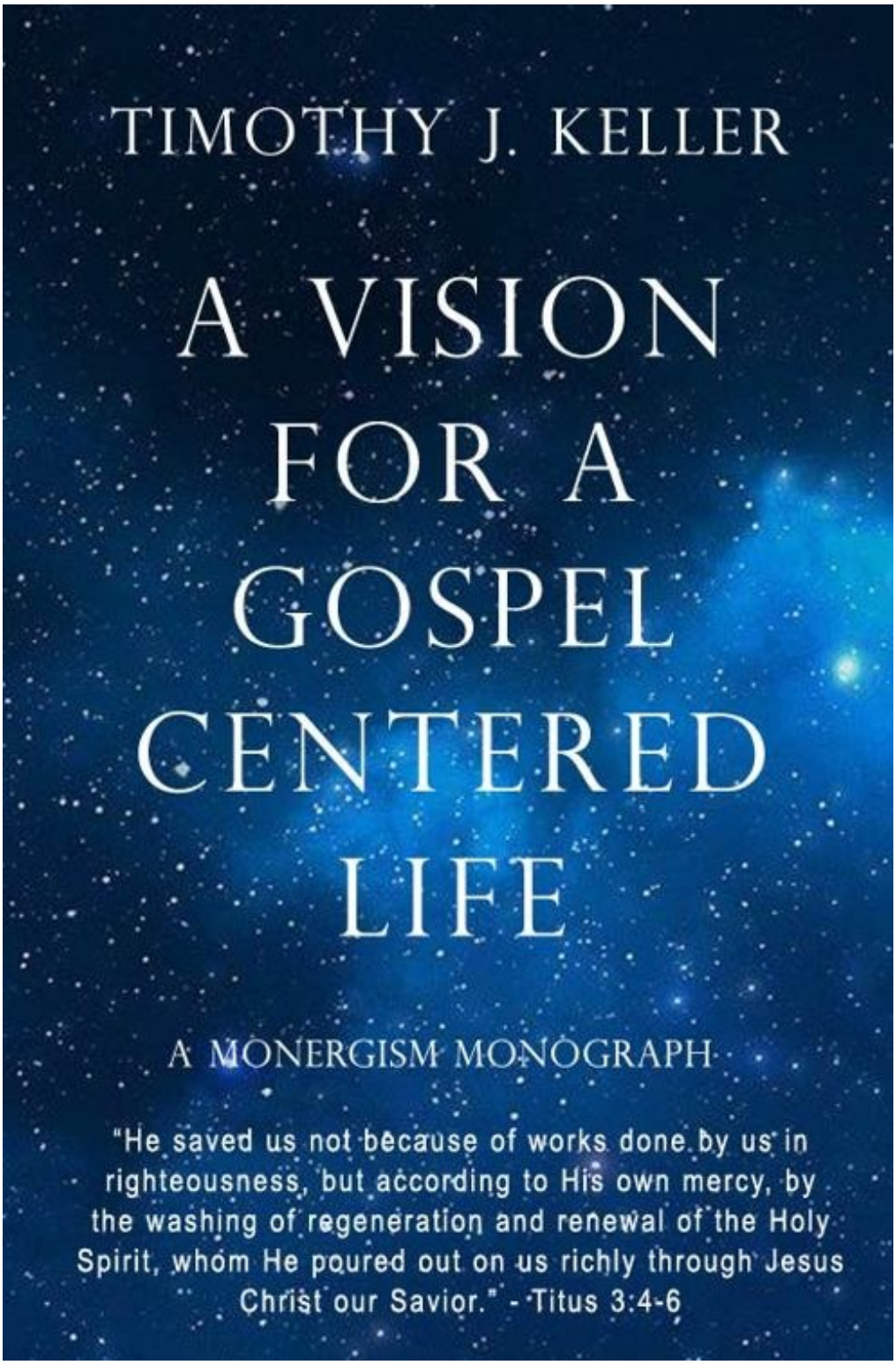
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A Vision for a Gospel-Centered Life

The Gospel: Justified – Tested - Works

13 Sermons

of

Dr. Timothy J. Keller

Redeemer Presbyterian Church

New York City , New York

and

Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Westminster Chapel

London , England

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PREFACE – STANDING ON THE SHOULDER OF GIANTS

Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Romans 10:17 (ESV)

John Owen, the greatest Puritan theologian and contemporary of **John Bunyan**, when asked by King Charles II why he, a great scholar, went to hear an uneducated tinker preach said, "***I would willingly exchange my learning for the tinker's power of touching men's hearts***. [1]"

Once or twice in a century God hauls off and creates a servant so mighty in gift that the only proper response is "Wow!" ***Charles Haddon Spurgeon*** *was one of God's special projects in the nineteenth century.* Dr. Haddon Robinson, Introduction to Spurgeon's Morning and Evening [2]

Dr. David Martin Lloyd-Jones was "*a thoroughly humble man. He was a man of prayer, a powerful evangelist, an* ***expository preacher of rare quality****, in the fullest sense a servant of the Word of God.*" Dr. F.F. Bruce

In 1959, ***Dr. Lloyd Jones*** *did a series of lectures on revival. When I came to New York City (in 1989), and was trying to figure how to preach, I listened to the Doctor's evening sermons…that all through the '50s and into the '60s he would preach evening messages…they were expository but they were evangelistic …aimed at the person who didn't*

believe…in London. I listened to scores of them…maybe hundreds of them. [3]

Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NYC

Tim Keller is the most culturally relevant preacher in America today.

Dr. Donald A. Carson, to a friend, September, 2007

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These thirteen sermons – herein labeled " Readings " in manuscript form, were preached in London and New York City . The 4th sermon by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was preached on March 14, 1954 . The other 12 sermons were preached by Dr. Timothy Keller in the fall of 2005 at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City , a series entitled the Vision of Redeemer.

The first three sermons of Dr. Keller focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The 4th sermon by Dr. Lloyd-Jones deals with the nature of faith, and the challenges every Christian will face, if indeed they are Christian. The last 9 sermons by Dr. Keller focus on the implications of really believing the gospel.

Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (20 December 1899 – 1 March 1981) was a Welsh Protestant minister, preacher and medical doctor who was influential in the Reformed wing of the British evangelical movement in the 20th century. For almost 30 years, he was the minister of Westminster Chapel in London . Dr. Lloyd-Jones was expected to assume the position of the Royal Family Physician following his mentor, but

shortly after graduation gave up his medical practice intentions to preach the Gospel.

Dr. Timothy J. Keller (born 1950) is an American Christian apologist, author, speaker, and the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City , New York . He is a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (M.Div., 1975) and Westminster Theological Seminary, where he received his D.Min in 1981 He was ordained by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and served as a pastor in Virginia for nine years, while serving as director of church planting for the PCA.

INTRODUCTION

Where there is no vision…no redemptive revelation of God…the people perish;

Proverbs 29:18 -Amplified Bible

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. ***Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs****.*

And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. ***Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.*** *She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead.*

"Revelation [i]"

Flannery O'Connor

The *first revelation*, after the book hit Mrs. Turpin directly over her right eye, came as her head cleared, and she asked the *book-throwing* girl

what she had to say for herself. The girl said, "*Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog*." Metaphorically speaking, it was a "*sledgehammer-to-the-heart-beginning*" to a day…which ended with Mrs. Turpin gasping, unblinkingly, at a mind-blowing revelation about her self-righteousness.

Isaiah and Jeremiah…major prophets of the Old Testament…as well as minor prophets, delivered similar blows to the ostensibly God-fearing people of their times. The same was true in Jesus' day vis-à-vis His encounters with the legalistic and unloving "religious leaders" tracking and monitoring His every word and movement. Dr. Timothy J. Keller, Senior Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and author of the New York Times bestseller, ***Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*** *[ii]* – critiqued for his own people the ease by which people rest easily in their own presuppositions about life…death… and immortality in a 12-part sermon series in the Fall of 2005. It could be considered a review of the ultimate questions and answers to the "why of our lives?"…as well as a summary of 16 years of ministry in Manhattan to that time, having begun in April, 1989. Each week Dr. Keller reminded his listeners that the Vision of Redeemer was – "(we're here) *to build a great city, for all people, through a movement of the Gospel, that brings about personal conversion, community formation, social justice and cultural renewal in New York City, and through New York the world.*

You may come to this work as a skeptic, a seeker, or one convinced that *Jesus remains a fascinating historical figure…but His followers will always be religious hypocrites* (like Mrs. Turpin) – *part of the reason we have so many problems in the world today*, You may well be surprised by the insightful words of Dr. Keller. Or, you may come as a person of faith – one believing that Jesus is who He said He was…and perhaps

discomforted by Mrs. Turpin's ***new*** **self-knowledge**. You too will find this work challenging to your own presuppositions.

The need for a *sustaining vision* that we can look to repeatedly was succinctly summarized by Eugene Peterson in his book *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best.* [iii]

There is no living the life of faith, whether by prophet or person, without some kind of sustaining vision. At some deep level we need to be convinced, and in some way or other we need periodic reminders, that no words are mere words. In particular, God's words are not mere words. They are promises that lead to fulfillments. God performs what He announces. God does what He says.

A sustaining vision is imperative to mitigate the 1000s of messages that pass our eyes every day – messages without encouragement, again, as Peterson put it:

If we forget that the newspapers are footnotes to Scripture, and not the other way around, we will finally be afraid to get out of bed in the morning. Too many of us spend far too much time with the editorial page and not nearly enough with the prophetic vision. We get our interpretation of politics and economics and morals from journalists when we should be getting only information; the meaning of the world is most accurately given to us by God's Word. [iv]

These twelve sermons of Dr. Keller, along with Dr. Lloyd-Jones one sermon, can easily serve as a comprehensive "***sustaining vision***," or Scriptural **worldview of our life of faith**, in which every area of our lives as believers, and as a community of believers, is addressed. This concept of "worldview" comes from the German word *Weltanschauung*…

meaning, the fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the entirety of the individual or society's knowledge and **point-of-view**. These sermons now in print form, for visual learners, and supplemental to the audio, can serve as a valuable resource for anyone desiring to live out the call of Jesus Christ from a Scriptural worldview in the context of the vagaries of the Christian's journey…in any place in this world.

In his biography of John Calvin [v], John Piper noted that the fundamental issue for Calvin, and about which he wrote was "*from the beginning to the end of his life… the issue of the centrality and supremacy and majesty of the glory of God*"…to which Martin Luther responded, "*Here is a writing which has hands and feet. **I rejoice that God raises up such men**.* [vi]" God does raise up such men, throughout history, and we believe He has done so in Tim Keller, to become "*the most culturally relevant preacher in America today*. [vii]"

These 13 sermons provide a worldview unique to the Gospel, to the preaching of Drs. Lloyd-Jones and Keller, and unique to their respective churches. We sense that these sermons encapsulate the true nature of the Gospel (in the first 3 sermons…and first three Readings of this book) – particularly the core idea of Paul in all his letters dealing with our standing before God, and summarized succinctly in Titus 3:4-6 *But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] **He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness**, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, [6] whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.* ***[viii]***

The 4th Reading (***Where is Your Faith***? – by Dr. Lloyd-Jones) should remove once for all any falsely held assumption that a life of faith

will be a one of great comfort and few, if any, trials.

The last 9 Readings of this monograph, address the "commands" of Scripture – the call to a life of Biblical faith – "*He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake*" – Psalm 23:3b. Briefly, the terms "indicative" and "imperative" refer to two different Greek verb moods commonly used by the New Testament authors in their teaching on justification and sanctification. The indicative is the mood of certainty or actuality. The imperative is the mood of command. The New Testament uses imperative statements when saying what we should do [ix]. The first three readings of this monograph dealing with the Gospel - tell us with certainty how we come to be in right standing before God (justified). The latter nine Readings address the call to a life pleasing to God – a ***faith which works***.

Lloyd-Jones' question was – where is your faith! How is your faith helping you in trying times?

In the final 9 Readings , Keller is surely suggesting (without doubt) in the 21st Century the same issue raised by James in the 1st Century, **do you really have a faith that works**, rather than an intellectual assent that gives you an unreasonable security about your ultimate future?

READING 1 - The Prodigal Sons

Luke 15: 1-2; 11-32

[1]Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. [2]But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."...[11]Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. [12]The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

[13]"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. [14]After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.[15]So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.[16]He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

[17]"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! [18]I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. [19]I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' [20]So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

[21]"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your so [22]"But the father

said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. [23]Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. [24]For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

[25]"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. [26]So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. [27]'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' [28]"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. [29]But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. [30]But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

[31]" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. [32]But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

A Story of Two Sons

This text has been crucial in both my life and in the life of our church. This parable is famous and for centuries has been called "The Parable of *the* Prodigal Son." ***The* son**. It's a great mistake to think that this is a story about one son. It's the story of two sons. It's a story of a younger and an older brother. You are meant to compare and contrast them. And if you don't compare and contrast them the way Jesus wants you to, you're going to miss the **radical message of this parable**, and it is radical. Jesus is saying here this: "*Every thought the human race has*

ever had about how to connect to God whether East or West, whether in the ancient, modern, post-modern era, in every religion, in all secular thought, it's been wrong. ***Every human idea of how to connect with God is wrong***."

Jesus is here to shatter all existing human categories. An historian once said...a*nd it* ***is*** *hard to grasp this*...when Christianity first appeared in the world, ***nobody called it a religion***. It wasn't seen as another religion. It was called the "anti-religion." It was seen as anti-religion. The Romans called the Christians for two hundred years "atheists." And the reason was that the Romans understood that what Christianity was saying about God was so different than what any other religion said, that is really shouldn't be given the same kind of name. It's in a whole other category all together. And they were right. And this passage tells us why they were right.

First, let's tell the story. Let's make sure we understand the story. Then let's draw out the three things I think Jesus is trying to tell us in this story...a story in two acts.

Act One: The Lost Younger Brother

Act One begins with a speech when the younger brother comes to the father and says "*Father, give me my share of the estate*." Now the original hearers when they heard this would have been absolutely astounded. If you had two sons, then when you died the estate would be divided two-thirds to the elder, one-third to the younger. The reason ...or rule of thumb was the oldest got a double portion of what all the other children got. So, if there were only two, the oldest got two-thirds, the youngest got one third. But that happened when the father died. When the son came and asked the father for his share of the estate before the

father's death, the original hearers would have been astounded. One commentator, Kenneth Bailey (a scholar who knows something about the history and culture of the time) put it like this: "To ask for the inheritance while the father is still alive is to wish him dead. [x]" What the younger son is saying is: "*I want your stuff, but I don't want you. I want the father's things, but I don't want the father. My relationship with you has just been a means to an end. And I am tired of it. I want my stuff now*." Unheard of!

But even more unheard of is the second half of verse 12 because if the original hearers were amazed at the speech in verse 12a, they were absolutely astonished by what the father did in verse 12b. Bailey goes on to say: "*A traditional middle-eastern father could only respond in one way. He would have been expected to drive the boy out of the house with verbal if not physical and violent blows* [xi]." But this father doesn't do that. What does it say? "*So he divided his property between them*." The translation uses the word *property* here, but the Greek word used is ***bios,*** from which we get our word biology. What it's really saying is - ***the father divided his life between them***. Why would he say that? We do not understand the relationship that people in the past had to their land...**to their land**. This father's estate was his land...his wealth was his land. He would have had to sell off a third of his land to give his son that part of the estate. Now if you really want to understand this you could always read a lot of books, like those of Wendell Berry.

But, if you would like a little bit briefer glimpse you can always look at the musical ***Oklahoma*** ...of Rogers and Hammerstein. ***[xii]*** One of the lines in the theme song goes like this: "*Oh we know we belong to the land. And the land we belong to is grand*." Do you notice what it says? The land we belong to. It doesn't say the land belongs to us. **We belong**

to it. We don't understand that. But ancient, Middle Eastern families identified with their land. Their very identity was bound up with the land. To lose your land was to lose yourself…and to lose part of your land was to lose your standing in the community…and that standing was tied to how much land you had. ***This son is asking his father to tear his life apart***…to tear apart his standing in the community. To tear himself apart, ***and he does***.

The hearers had never seen a Middle Eastern patriarch respond to such an insult like this. You know what this father is doing? He is enduring. He is bearing the worst thing a human being can bear - rejected love. When someone treats us like this, what we do is we get mad and we retaliate and we reject and we do everything we can possibly do to diminish our affection for the person…so we don't hurt so much. But this father maintains his love for his son, even under these circumstances, and endures the agony of rejected love.

Then the son goes off and he squanders everything he has. When he is literally down in the mud, literally down in the pig sty, he realizes how stupid he's been, and he comes up with a plan. And his plan is: first of all, "*I realize I have been stupid. I will go home and confess to my father*." But notice there is another part to his plan…which is to say, "*I will go back and say 'Father, I have sinned, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired men.'*" Now, that's not that same thing as asking to be a slave. A slave or a servant worked in the estate, lived on the estate, but a hired man was a craftsman and lived in town and had to be apprenticed to learn his skill, and therefore made a wage.

Most commentators think that what the young man was doing was very simple. The rabbis taught if you had violated the community principles the only way back into the community was not just an

apology…you had to make restitution. And what the son is probably doing is coming back with a plan and saying, "*Father, if you will apprentice me to one of your hired men and teach me a craft, I will come work FOR you. I know I can't be your son. I know I can't come back into the family, but this way* ***at least I can begin to pay you off****. Pay you back a little bit for what I've done to you.*" So he has a plan. And he comes back.

The father sees him far off…and ***he runs***. **Middle Eastern patriarchs did not run**. Children ran. Youth ran. Women would run. But not fathers. Not owners of estates. You'd have to pick up your robes and bare your legs and you didn't do that sort of thing. But this one does. Many commentators have said that this father doesn't act like a father. He acts like a mother here. Middle Eastern fathers did not act like this. Mothers did. He runs to his son. *He shows absolute emotional abandon and kisses him.* And the son tries to roll out his restitution plan. You can imagine. He gets out a PowerPoint Presentation and he says, "*Dad I got a…" (*you know). He starts to roll out his compensation plan.

The father won't even hear it…because he says, "*Get the best robe.*" The best robe would be the father's robe. This is what he is saying. "*I am not going to wait for you to clean up. I am not even going to wait for you to take a bath. I'm certainly not going to wait for you to prove yourself*" He says to his servants, "*Cover my son's nakedness and rags with the robe of my office and honor, and we're going to feast.*" And, to the son…"*you are not going to earn your way back into the family. I'm bringing you back.*"

Act Two: "The Lost Elder Brother"

When the elder brother hears about it he's furious. And as you see from the text, he is particularly upset about the cost…" That may not be as

obvious to you as it will be. **Did you notice that the big deal here is this calf**? The elder brother says to the servant "*what's going on*?" The servant says "*Your younger brother is back and the father gave him the calf.*"

And the elder brother goes to the father and says, "*You gave him a calf*!" (And we are sitting here reading this saying, "*I know this means something, but I don't know what it is.*") And the elder brother says, "*You've never even given me a goat and you're giving him a calf*! " What is this all about? Well, Middle Eastern people at this time and place **almost never had meat for a meal**. It was a delicacy. And if you ever had meat it was a party. But the greatest delicacy…and the most expensive possible thing to do…*was to slay a fatted calf.* The whole village would have been there. It was the sort of thing that most families wouldn't do as a private party, ever, it was so expensive. And therefore the older brother is saying, "*How dare you use our wealth like this. I have obeyed you. I should have some say in this.*" In other words "*I have some right over your things. How dare you do this*?!" And **he insults the father,** because, in verse 29 <u>he doesn't say</u> "*Father*" <u>he says "*Look*</u>." Which is a kind of English translation that gets across the fact that this is a ***deliberate insult***? He doesn't give any address to his father at all. He is basically saying, "*Look you*!" It is a most incredible insult. He publicly humiliates his father by not going in to the greatest feast his father has ever thrown…makes his father come out. He publicly humiliates him by refusing to call him "*Father*." So… what does the father do? He responds with a very tender word. He says "*My son…*"…which actually could be translated "*My child.*"

"*My child. I still want you in the feast. Almost every other father I know would have disowned you already for what you have just done,* ***but I***

still want you in."

And as we are on the edge of our seats asking the question, "*Will, in the end, the family come together in unity and love? How will the older brother respond? Will they all come together in the end*?" **Jesus ends the parable and never tells us**. Cliffhanger!! Now, why? What is Jesus trying to get across? Jesus brings the parable to life with THREE RADICAL re-definitions

1. Jesus redefines God

2. Jesus redefines sin

3. Jesus redefines salvation

He redefines God

First of all, He redefines God. There's an awful lot…and I mean an awful lot of people who really struggle with this idea, this concept in the Bible, of God as a Father. I've shown you many times in the past, however, that Jesus, more than anyone in history, called God "*Father*." He was the first person to ever address God as Father and every single time He ever addresses God in the Bible, except one, He calls Him "*Father*." This idea of God as a Father is very, very rare in this Old Testament. But Jesus lifts it up. Here He defines what He means by "*Father*".

People struggle because so many of them say, "*I just hate this idea of god. It's too patriarchal. 'Father.' I don't like the Biblical idea of God as a father. It's patriarchal. Fathers are hard, and they're harsh, and they're condemning, and they mean rule and control, and I want a loving god; a sensitive god; a god who cares; a forgiving god; a god who longs for*

reconciliation and relationship; a sensitive god."

But…do you have any idea…any clue as to what Jesus Christ is saying here? Jesus Christ gives us a father unlike any father of that time. His emotional abandon, his generosity, his willingness to receive the agony of rejected love. And here is what Jesus is saying. He says, "*Really, I'm sorry. I know a lot of you had fathers like this, but, my Father is not like that. For all of his power and majesty. He is all of these things too. He is loving. He is suffering. He is longing for your love. He loves you.*" Jesus brought traits and attributes together in a Man – every one: the meekness and majesty of God, the power and tenderness of God. Jesus is saying through this parable, "*that's who God is…that's what He's like.*" No one had ever described God in those ways. He redefines God.

He redefines sin

The brilliance of the rhetoric of Jesus here is that in the First Act (the Younger Brother Act) Jesus gives us **an image of sin that is very traditional**. Any Pharisee, any religious person, anybody could look at that and say. "*yeah that's sin.*" You know, prostitutes…right? insulting his father, pigsty, down in the gutter, dissolute, self-indulgent. That's sin.

But then in the Second Act Jesus turns the tables. Because when you get to the end of the Second Act this is what you're left with. There are two sons. One is very, very good. One is very, very bad, and they're <u>both alienated from the father's heart</u>. Each one of them wanted the father's things, but not the father. Each one of them…*think carefully*…each son used the father to get what they really loved. They didn't love the father; they used the father to get what they really loved: the status, the wealth – the things they really loved. *They wanted his stuff.* But one of them did it by being very, very good and one of them by being very, very bad.

They're both lost. The bad one is lost in his badness; but the good one is lost in his goodness. They're both estranged from their father.

And in the end, it's the bad son that's saved and the good one, as far as we know, is lost. And that is counter-intuitive to all our thinking…against what anyone has ever believed. *The lover of prostitutes is saved and the man of moral rectitude is lost*? And it gets worse. Because, when you see why the good son was lost, he was **not lost in spite of his goodness, he was lost *because* of it**. He says it. He says, "*here's the reason I won't go into the feast of the father. Here is the reason I reject you, Father: I have never disobeyed you.*" It's not his sins keeping him from the father. It's his goodness. ***He's proud of his goodness***. It's not his sins that are keeping him from the father. *It's his righteousness*. Ok…his self-righteousness.

The reason I've included the first two verses of the text is that it tells us there ***two people groups*** around Jesus when he told this parable: (1) tax collectors and sinners – (2) Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And you suddenly realize who the two sons in the parable are. *Sinners are younger brothers*. They've run off. They live any way they want. Pharisees, religious teachers, moral people, *religious people – they're the elder brother*.

What you have here are the two basic ways that human beings try to make the world right, to put themselves right, and to connect to God: **moral conformity and self-discovery**. (1) **Moral conformity** people say, "*I'm not going to do what I want to do, I'm going to comply. I'm going to submit, I'm going to be good. I'm going to work hard.*" (2) '**Self-discovery'** people say "*I'm going to decide what is right for me. I'm going to decide what is right or wrong for me. I'm going to do what I want to do. I'm going to live as I want to live. I'm going to find my true*

self."

Each group is saying, "*This is the way the world would be better*." Each side says, "*This is the way that you'll be happy*." Jesus says, "*You are both wrong…both wrong*. ***You are both lost***. *You are both making the world a terrible place in different ways*."

See, the **elder brothers** of the world divide the world in to. They say, "*the good people are in, the bad people…**you**, are out*." And the **younger brothers** divide the world in to do as well. The self-discovery people say, "*the open-minded, progressive-minded people are in and the bigoted and judgmental people are out. You*"

And Jesus says, "*Neither*." He says, "*It's the humble who are 'in' and the proud who are 'out.'*" He says it's the people who know they are not good…or open-minded…who know that they need sheer grace that are "in," and the people who continue to believe that they're on "the right side" of those divides are "out." The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not religion or ir-religion. It's not morality or immorality. It's not moralism or relativism. It's off the scale. It is not half-way in the middle. It's something else. Now you see what Jesus is saying about sin. Now you see how different it is.

There are two ways to be your own savior and lord, just as there were two different ways for the sons to get control of the father's stuff. One son tried to get control of the father's stuff, not by loving the father, but trying to use the father to get what he wanted. One son tried to gain control of the father's stuff by living a bad life, but the other son tried to control the father's stuff by living a very, very, very, very good life. Just so, there are two ways to be your own savior and lord. There are two ways to try to control God…the people around you…and your own life. There

are two ways to of stay in control. One is by going off into the blue and living *any ol' way* you want. And the other is being moral, very religious, reading your Bible, obeying the Ten Commandments, and praying all the time. [xiii]

Flannery O'Connor in Wise Blood, one of her novels, described one of her characters like this: "*He says there was a dark nameless understanding in him that* ***the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin***. [xiv]" She nailed elder–brotherness. You know what she is saying? If you think, "*if I love people, and if I'm good and if I pray, and I read my Bible, then* ***God has to bless me***." Jesus might be your rewarder, He might be your example, He might be a lot of things, but He is not your savior. **You're your own savior**. You are avoiding Jesus as Savior by avoiding sin. You're trying to control God through what you're doing. All your morality, all your obedience is a way of getting God to give you what you really want. And it's not God…Himself.

-- Religious people obey God…to get things.

-- Gospel people obey God…to get God, to resemble Him, to love Him, to know Him, to delight Him.

You see why elder brother lostness and younger brother lostness are both terrible? Younger brother lostness with its self-indulgence and addiction brings a lot of misery into the world. But elder brother lostness – you see it…you see how judgmental he is…look at his anger. He's always angry. Why is he angry? Because he's lived such a good life that God the Father owes him things his way. And of course your life never…except for a few years at a time…never, ever goes the way you want. If you are living a good life because you think that I deserve a good life, you're always going to have an undercurrent of anger. You're always going to be looking

down on other people.

- According to Jesus' definition, ***religion*** *is* the source of a tremendous source of amount of misery and strife in this world.

Really…it all comes down to motivation. Of course if you love the Father, you're going to obey him…but why? The elder brother doesn't obey out of love. The elder brother obeys to get stuff. How can our motivation be completely changed around so the reason we *do this stuff* we do, is not as he says - to slave, out of duty, mechanical, joyless, creating judgementalism and superiority, but out of love and gratitude? Last point…

Jesus redefines salvation

Jesus doesn't just redefine God. He doesn't just redefine sin. He redefines salvation. Do you now see why Christianity cannot divide the world into good and bad people? Moral conformity and self-discovery just don't go deep enough.

The default mode of every human heart whether moral or immoral, religious or ir-religious, self-discovery or moral conformity - ***the default mode of every human heart is self-justification***. Being you own savior and lord, trying to control things, trying to control people. Neither self-discovery nor moral conformity go deep enough to get at what is really wrong with the world…what is wrong with you and me.

So how can we be saved? Jesus says we need three things. Not moral conformity, not self-discovery. **We need three things**.

First, you need the initiating love of the father. You notice the father goes out to both sons in order to bring them in. He goes out to the

younger brother and he kisses him before he repents. The repentance does not trigger the kiss. The kiss facilitates repentance. You're never going to seek the Father…unless first He seeks you. And in many cases, by the way, even as you read this book…He might be seeking you right now. That might be the reason why you're feeling the way you feel at this moment.

But notice that the father goes out to the older brother, and this is amazing, because if you remember, Jesus is telling this *parable* to Pharisees. And…Jesus knows that it's *the religious people are the ones who are going to kill him*. And he knows that, because *the Gospel is every bit as offensive* to moral and religious people as it is immoral and self-discovery people. Every bit as offensive. Except the religious people usually have more power. And yet, in the parable, He has the father go out and plead with the Pharisee to come in. Jesus is not a Pharisee about Pharisees. He's not self-righteous about the self-righteous. It's amazing.

You know, as we saw in the 2004 Presidential election, the red states thought the blue states were the trouble, and the blue states thought the red states were the trouble. And Jesus says, "***You are all are the trouble, and I love you***."

Secondly, you need to learn how to repent for something besides sins. I phrased that very carefully. You have to learn to repent for something besides sins. See…the younger brother comes back and he's got a lot of sins to repent of. You and I and most everybody in the world would say, "*Oh, that's what you do. That's how you get right with God. You repent of your list*." But do you see how radical this parable is? The elder brother is lost…but he's got nothing on his list (…that's how he thinks). He says, "*I have always obeyed you*" and the father doesn't contradict him. So how does a person who is lost, with no sins on the list,

get saved? And of course there is no such thing as a person who is sinless, we know that. But here is the point: when Pharisees sin, and they do sometimes, of course they repent. They feel terrible about their sins. But when they're done repenting, they're still Pharisees. **The difference in a Christian and a moralist is this**: Christians also repent of what they've done wrong. Sure you do. You have to. They repent of what they have done wrong, **<u>but</u> a Christian is someone who has also learned to repent for the reasons *he or she did right***.

Now…I know almost none of my readers understand what I just wrote. Don't sit there like New Yorkers thinking, "*Oh yeah, yeah, yeah*." Christians…of course they repent for what they've done wrong, but they also recognize that *the reason for even the right things that they do* is self-justification…and a desire to control God and others. And when that penny drops, when you begin to see the desire to be your own savior and lord not only of the bad things you've done, but also the good things, and when you say, "*that's got to change*,"…when that epiphany happens, when that penny drops, that changes everything. Everything. Everything in your life changes. The way you handle criticism…the way you see people who are different than you. Everything changes - the way you live, the way you relate to God. Everything. **It's called the new birth** because it's so radical. Do you know how to do that? Have you done that?

Thirdly, you need to be melted and moved by what it cost to bring you home. Now you see, I just said the key difference in a Christian and a Pharisee is motivation.

- The Pharisee obeys God to get things.

- The Christian obeys God just to get God.

Why? Because something the Christian has seen has *melted his heart toward God* so he loves the Father finally, or *she* loves the Father finally. What is that? You have to see what it cost God to bring you home. Well you say, "*It didn't seem to cost him anything. The kid came home with a kind of desire to compensate, we think, but the father wouldn't let him, so it was free, it didn't cost anything.*" It didn't cost ***him*** anything, but *it cost somebody else a lot.*

At the very end Jesus gives us the hint. The last verse, when the father says, "*Everything I have is yours.*" **That's literally true**. Why? Because the younger brother had liquidated and now had spent every bit of his inheritance, and now every single thing that the father had, belonged to the elder brother- every robe, every ring, every fatted calf belonged the elder brother. The younger brother could only be brought back into the family at the enormous cost and expense to the elder brother. It's not free. It's not simple to be saved. Somebody has to pay. The elder brother had to pay and he was furious about it.

Now why does Jesus offer up this parable about such a nasty elder brother? Because He's showing the Pharisees what they look like.

But what would a *true elder brother* have done? A true elder brother would have seen the agony of the father and said, "*Father, I'm going to go out and look for my brother. And if he has ruined himself and he's squandered all of his inheritance, I'll bring him home even at my own expense.*" That would have been a true elder brother. Poor kid. He doesn't have a true elder brother. But we do. Jesus Christ shows us a bad elder brother so we'll long for the right one. We don't just need an elder brother to go out into the next town to find us. We need someone to come from heaven to earth. We don't need an elder brother who brings us into God's family just at the cost of his wallet, but at the cost of his life.

You've got to understand that *on the cross Jesus Christ was stripped naked so that we could be clothed in a robe of honor that we don't deserve*. On the cross Jesus called "*My God, my God*," the only time He never called Him *Father*…because at that moment He was not being treated as a son - ***so you and I could be***. There He paid the debt that deep down we all know we owe. And because everything He had…was the *everything* the Father had…but He shares it with us…and He brings us home at the enormous expense to Himself. And when you see that, to the degree you see that, it will absolutely change your motivation. It will change your whole approach to God. And you won't be into self-discovery or moral conformity. You'll be a Christian.

Applications

First, a lot of you would be younger brother types. Why? Because where do you think younger brothers go? They go to New York . Where do you think this guy went? He left Ohio …he left Alabama …he went to New York . And a lot of people in New York say, "*The problem with the world, to a great degree, is religion. The problem of the world is the moralism. The problem with the world is the self-righteousness, the strife. That's a big problem with the world.*"

And guess what? This parable says, Jesus says, "*You're right. But guess what? Your self-discovery mode hasn't really been working real well lately.*" But…you don't want to go back into Christianity…it's just another religion, and Jesus says, "*You're wrong*." Would you start to reconsider it? Reconsider and realize maybe you're wrong. That Christianity isn't just like other religions **at all**. You may have had a lousy home. You might have had the kind of father that everybody else thought this guy should be. **This is the love you need**.

Secondly, this parable is really the elder brother's. You know why? Why do you think it ends the way it does? Jesus is basically speaking to Pharisees and He's inviting ***all elder brothers*** to listen to this appeal and to put yourselves in it, and respond. It is participatory theater. And there are a lot of you that you've got an elder brother type of heart. And so you're always mad. You're mad at those people who have hurt you…and you're mad at people who've hurt you and there are classes of people you look down on. And mainly, you feel like "*my life's not going the way it ought to and I'm the good one in my family and why is it everybody else has broken my parents' heart and they're happy and I'm not*?" And the reason you are so unhappy is because of your goodness. The main thing between us and God is not our sins as much as our damnable good works. And you're mad at people and you're mad at things because "*I've tried hard, I've tried hard and my life is not going right*." ***Lay your deadly goodness down, down at Jesus' feet. Stand in Him and Him alone, gloriously complete***.[xv] We'll never stop being elder brothers until we see and are melted by what our true elder brother did for us.

And lastly, hey, if you're going to be in a church that believes this is Christianity, we're going to be always misunderstood, because there are going to be things that we do here, attitudes we have, practices we do. Some people are going to say, "*Well now wait, that sounds like a liberal human institution."* Or, *"That sounds like a conservative institution*." Of course that's the way it's going to be. We're going to be misunderstood all the time. People are going to try to stick us in human categories and though…of course, since we aren't Jesus…to some degree we have a tendency to go into human categories. But ultimately you are not going to be able to stick a church that cares about the Gospel like this into those categories. We are going to be misunderstood, but that's alright. Jesus understands, and He is our true older brother.

READING 2 – CHRIST, OUR LIFE

Colossians 3: 1-14

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2]Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. [3]For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. [4] When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

[5] Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. [6] Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. [7] You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. [8]But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. [9]Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. [11]Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

[12] Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. [13]Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. [14]And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.(

In the previous chapter, the subject was the Gospel and the freeness of

God's love – it's absolutely free. In fact, we saw that if we try to earn or deserve the favor of God it makes you a Pharisee…makes you a religious person…it makes you a moralistic person…*it makes you a big part of what's wrong with the world.* We saw that moralistic people do good… they live good lives, but they do it *out of fear*, *out of pride*, and *out of a need for control.* They do it out of fear of rejection…they do it out of pride of being better than others…they do it in order to control God. But a lot of people when they hear that, the idea that God's love is absolutely free, it's unconditional…they say, "*well o.k., if I believed that it wouldn't change the way I live.*" *If I believed that God just loved me that freely, that unconditionally, then I could live any way I wanted.*" This passage shows us that this is not true.

When you go to the end of the passage, where it says *there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free…w*hen it says you're chosen (verse 12)…and by the way, *to be chosen does not mean to be "choice…"to be chosen simply means that God came after you.,* He sought you, and it doesn't matter whether you've followed the Bible…followed the law…what it's really saying, of course, is God's love is free, and yet, the whole passage is about the fact that your life changes…if you're a Christian, your life changes…the Gospel changes your life, not just in spite of the freeness of God, but because of it. That's the message here. *If you say that you believe the Gospel and your life does not change in a way that other people can see, then you have not really grasped it.* <u>The Gospel brings about radical change in a life</u>. Now, how does it do that**?**

In this passage we see (1) the inevitability of radical change, (2) the Gospel method for radical change, and (3) why it works.

The Inevitability of Radical Change

We should be struck by verses 9 and 10…Paul says "*you have put off the old self and you've put on the new self.*" What's intriguing about that is the radical nature of the language. Everybody makes changes. But what Paul is saying is, ***IF*** you put off certain beliefs…you put off certain behavior…you put off certain practices, you put on other ones,…and when you've made such a shift in your beliefs….your beliefs have changed so much…your view of things have changed so much…your practices have changed so much, ***then you could say you're actually a new person***.

Paul deliberately, by saying "*you have put off the old self and you've put on the new self,*" is therein evoking the language of identity, and he is saying that the change the Gospel brings is so radical that you really become another person. **You've been converted**. You don't just change, you get converted. Now, right away, a lot of people say: "*Oh, there you go, you Christians want to convert everyone. Just let everyone be.*" I would like to propose to you, that whoever you are, you're going to be converted…by somebody or something. You're not just going to go on; you're going to be converted. What do I mean?

An article in *New York Times Magazine* illustrates this point. [xvi] The author, Mark Lilla, a professor at the University of Chicago… a major academic and writer…and an authority in the relationship of religion and society. What's interesting about the article is that he tells about how for several years as a teenager, and young adult, that he considered himself to be a *born-again* Christian…but then it "*kinda' went away*." Now he sees himself as a secular person. Yep, from his perspective, *conversion didn't work*. Yet, get this, at the end of the article, he says something that very clearly shows he has had a lasting conversion. At the end of the article he tells about the fact that because he's a writer about religion and

society, this past summer he went to the Billy Graham Crusade in Queens , and afterwards he met a young man from Poland , a student at the Wharton Business School , University of Pennsylvania . This young man was in New York City to do a summer internship at a Wall Street firm…*from this elite school, a bright young man* and all that, and **to Lilla's shock**, the young man recounted that what Billy Graham had said made sense and he'd gone forward and given his life to Christ. This just absolutely shocked the Lilla. And, this is what he said:

I found it hard to conceal my bafflement, since Billy had not said much at all. You must be born again - that was it. I felt a professorial lecture welling up in my throat about the history and psychology of religion. I wanted to expose him to the pastiche of the Biblical text, the syncretic nature of Christian doctrine, the church's ambiguous role as incubator and stifler of human knowledge, the theological idiosyncrasy of American evangelicalism. I wanted to warn him against the anti-intellectualism of American religion today and the political abuses to which it is subject. I wanted to cast doubt on the step he was about to take, to help him see there are other ways to live, other ways to seek knowledge, love, perhaps even self-transformation. I wanted to convince him that his dignity depended on maintaining a free, skeptical attitude toward doctrine. ***I wanted to save him.***

*I thought I was out of that business, but maybe not. It took years to acquire the education I missed as a young man, an education not only in books, (**and here, Lilla is so self-knowing**) but in a certain comportment toward myself and the world around me. Doubt, like faith, has to be learned. It's a skill. But the curious thing about skepticism is that its adherents, ancient and modern, have so often been proselytizers. Why do they care? Skepticism offers no good answer to that question…*

and I don't have one myself.

That's quite right and quite brilliant. Don't you see what he just said… very, very directly. What he said was **his doubts about Christianity were really an alternate set of beliefs**…about reality, about what it meant to be a dignified person, an authentic person…BUT…none of that could be proven. It's all a leap of faith. It's just a leap of faith to something else. And he was sure that the way in which he believed authentic personhood was realized (*his leap of faith*)…was to become completely detached…and skeptical against any doctrine. He was a strong proponent of "*skepticism toward any doctrine…'that's what makes you a wise person…sophisticated and authentic…AND, if more people were like that, the world would be a better place.*'" He suddenly realized that he was no different. **He had a view of reality that had converted him**. It had given him an identity and that made him want to save others from their wrong views of reality. Everybody has got one. Notice what he said: "*his dignity depended on maintaining a free skeptical attitude toward all doctrine.*" Except that one…**his**. You will be converted by something.

Duke University Chaplain William Willimon comments:

The dominant culture in which we live is that of expressive individualism…since the Enlightenment…People like to say, "*Well, what the church says might be ok for some, but I think you have to determine right and wrong for yourself.*" But they're not thinking for themselves. They're doing exactly what the culture tells them. In reality they're espousing the very way of knowing that's been imposed on them by their culture…and a very white, Western, individualistic one it is. The question, "*Do you think we ought to convert people to Christ*?' assumes there are already untouched, unformed people out there and there are pushy

Christians trying to convert them to their way of thinking. **No**, <u>everyone has been deeply formed into some point of view that is not innate</u>. The real question you must face is "*which externally imposed formation will have its way with me?*"

You are going to be converted by something. Some comprehensive view of reality will form your very identity. And, whatever that view of reality is, it's not provable. It's a leap of faith. How inane to think Christians are wrong to try to convert people. Everybody's being converted. You're going to be converted. You're going to have your life radically changed. You're going to have a new self. And it's going to be in response to something that comes into your life. Which is it going to be, though?

The Gospel Method of Radical Change

How could the Gospel bring such a radical change that it could be said that you become **essentially *a new self***? I would propose that the answer can be found by moving up in the passage, rather than down in the passage… moving from the end to the beginning… …you can see it in the first two paragraphs.

"*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature*" (v. 5)…and "*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (verse 2)*. <u>There are two things which you do</u>. Two things through the Gospel… that radically change you.

Looking at the first one*: Put to death what belongs to your earthly nature*, or *what is earthly in you*. What does that mean? Let's call these two things (vs. 5 and vs. 2) ***<u>digging down</u>*** and ***<u>looking up</u>***.

First of all, digging down. Now there is a long list of things (character

traits) in this paragraph that would be better not to have: *anger, malice, slander, bitterness, etc.* You say, "*oh yeah, I'd love to be free from these things*,"…yet you find they keep coming back…over and over…you're just not able to *will them away*. The ***key*** to removing those things from your life is found in two important words smack in the middle of this text, in fact of the whole passage: (**1**) evil desires and (**2**) second, idolatry.

Evil desires. Now this is crucial for us…as over the years people's lives have been radically changed as they've come to understand the meaning of *evil desires*, which is our translation of a single Greek word. This word…evil desires, is an effort on the part of the translators to get across the word ***epithumia*** which **literally means an epi-desire or an overdesire**…an inordinate desire…a magnified desire…an excessive desire. And when you and I see this word, (actually we see two…*evil* and *desire*…) it's almost always it's translated evil desire or sinful desire, or something like that…it's very hard to translate.

In the English, and easy way to be read, since it pops up throughout the New Testament whenever the author is talking about character change, it's in there, but seldom do we see how key it is *because of the translation issue*. When you think of the words *evil desires*…what do you think that means? You think it means desiring something evil. **Wrong**! In other words, when you see the words "evil desires" you think, '*ok, there's a forbidden list here…things I'm not supposed to do…and an evil desire is to desire one of those evil things*.' But we have a problem here…because in the previous chapter we saw that Pharisees never do anything on the forbidden list, but they are lost. Not only are they lost, but they are very much part of what's wrong in the world. Not only that, they're the ones that killed Jesus, not the ones that were doing the stuff on the forbidden list.

So we suddenly realize, "*ok, I get it…the essence of what's wrong with me is that I desire something that is evil.*" But that's not what epithumia is. **Epithumia** is not so much talking about ordinary desire for something that's bad…it's **an over, inordinate, or excessive desire for something that is good**. That is the essence of what's wrong with us. And right away you say, "*now wait a minute, what's that mean*? It actually means addiction, in a sense. And you say "*wait a minute, why*? *What is an overdesire? Why is that the problem*?' Well, that leads us to our second word, idolatry.

Idolatry. When you read this passage in Colossians, the word idolatry is only related structurally to the word greed, which means an idolatry of money. However, if you go to the parallel passage in Ephesians 5 [4], a very similar passage, it's very clear that the word epithumia is attached to everything. What the author, Paul, is saying there is that all your bitterness, all your impurity, all of your malice, all of your problems, everything that troubles you, is a result of idolatry. And what is idolatry? **It's taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing**. This is how your heart works psycho-dynamically according to the Bible unless God changes it. In Exodus 20, God says, "*I am the Lord your God…You shall have no other gods before me.*"

There are only two options: (**a**) you either worship the uncreated **true God,** or (**b**) you will worship some other created thing as a **false god**. There is no third alternative. You're either going to worship God, or you're going to worship something else. But it's not possible for your heart to not adore something, not to build its identity on something…not to build its significance on something. Not to ***make something your life***. How do you know what those things are? This passage is telling you…the Bible tells you, that you will never understand yourself, you'll

never understand your emotions, you'll never be able to make any permanent changes…it will only be superficial and temporary. Unless you understand this!

You say, "*well, how do I know what those good things are that I've turned into ultimate things…those things that I've turned into saviors… those things that I've turned into my meaning…my hope…little gods as it were…how do I know what they are*?" Well, **the answer** lies in a series of questions which you must ask yourself: what '*thing'* or '*things*,' if you lost it/them or they failed you…(you could be talking about your financial status, you could be talking about a personal relationship, you could be talking about your family, you could be talking about professional identity…and infinite number of things…human approval or power and influence…or control of your environment…it could be anything), what things if you lost it or them…if that happened **you wouldn't even want to live**. What are those things? Every one has something!

Listen; there are very religious people who say, "*I believe in God*." There are *very* Christian people who say: "*I've accepted Jesus as Savior. I don't have any idols in my life*." **OH YES YOU DO**!! Something is your ***functional* savior**…if it's not Him. There is something you're looking to functionally…that's how you know (if you have it) you're ok! It gives you meaning, it gives you security, and it gives you hope. That's how you feel good about yourself…that's how you feel like you have real meaning… security…hope for the future. So religious people don't think they've got them (idols) but they do…and irreligious people say, "*oh, I'm a secular person…I don't worship*." **YES YOU DO**!! Religious people say, "*God is my Savior*." But, He's not! Irreligious people say, "*I don't worship anything*." **Yes you do**! This is true of everybody…everybody is like this. And here's how you know what those idols are.

- First, you know that if you lose **IT**, you wouldn't want to live. It's your life. You've made it your life.

- Second, follow the inordinate desires, the ***epithumias*** back to their source.

If a good thing in your life is jeopardized, you worry. If an ultimate thing is jeopardized, you are paralyzed and fall apart. If a good thing in your life is blocked by somebody, you get mad at the person or situation… you get angry. But **if an ultimate thing is blocked by somebody, you get bitter**. Rage! If a good thing in your life is lost, you're very sad. But if it's an ultimate thing, you want to throw yourself off a bridge. Do you understand your emotions? Do you see why certain things just absolutely cast you down? Do you see why your emotions are out of control…do you understand why you find yourself doing certain kinds of things…things you never thought you could do? It's because these things drive you.

When you give your heart to a functional savior…a functional lord…a functional god… see, religious people or Christians say, "*oh, no no no, Jesus is my Savior*" and irreligious people say, "*oh, no no no, I'm not worshiping anything*," but everybody is doing it. Until you understand this…until you dig down deep you cannot change, you cannot understand yourself. And whatever you've given your heart to, like this, ***it converts you.*** It gives you your identity. It gives you a sense of worth. And as a result it drives you and you'll spend all your life never getting enough of "it." Always being desperately afraid…always being thrown about by your inordinate desires. Have you dug down to see what those things are? Until you do that, really, you will have all these out of control emotions, passions, lusts, and problems…all these addictions…all these difficulties. So, you see…you must dig down and figure out who you really are! See

what's "down there." What's driving you?

Now, **the second thing** the Gospel calls you to do is ***looking up***. The Gospel calls you to do this because the Gospel is not a list of rules to obey…dos and don'ts. It's about making God your Savior and Lord through Jesus Christ. As soon as you see *that* as the Gospel, it throws everything in your life into a new relief…a new light. And that's what we're looking for. Now what do you do? When you begin to realize what's there…in your heart…and what's driving you…and what's controlling you…**what do you do**?

You have to believe and ***have your heart riveted by the things*** in verses 1-4: "*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* [2]*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.* [3]*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.* [4] *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*" Ok, now what does this mean?

First of all, **the idols of the heart cannot simply be removed… they can only be replaced**. They can't be removed, they can only be replaced. I've seen many people over the years, very often through counseling, or just through the hard knocks of life, finally start to realize that they were slaves to what their parents had said. They're slaves to their parental expectations. Or they're slaves to people's approval. Or they're slaves to their need to control the environment. They suddenly realize that they are slaves to something…and they suddenly say, in effect, that they can, by a simple act of the will, no longer be enslaved… "*I am not going to be controlled by these things*." That will never work. Not for very long it won't.

Thomas Chalmers, the famous Scottish Presbyterian minister put it this way:

There is not one personal transformation in which the heart is left without an object of ultimate beauty and joy. The heart's desire for one particular object can be conquered… but its desire to have some object is unconquerable. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one. ***[xvii]***

What we see here then…it says in verse 2…is '*to* ***set your mind*** *on something*,'…but verse 1 says you have to ***set your heart*** on something. Something you *grasp with the mind* **has to rivet and capture your heart**. That is the only thing that is going to save you and change you and move you away from the old self, which is basically driven by these idols, to a new self. What is that? The passage says that "*you died*"**…**and then it says "*you have been raised*." Do you see how radical this is? Paul is writing to people who are obviously alive, and he says, "you died." "You died…"what's that supposed to mean? You were raised…with Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God. Is that just metaphor? No…it's not just metaphor. And here is what this is saying…**first there's a truth** that you set your mind on, **and then it's that truth** *you have to bring into your heart…and that's what actually changes your character*.

What is the truth you are supposed to know with the mind? We're being told here that when you become a Christian…when you say "*I believe in you Lord Jesus*"…<u>what makes you a Christian is not</u> that you are now living in a certain way (though of course we see change comes) …**but what makes you a Christian is that you are now *in Christ***. It means *that God sees you as so one with Him (that is Christ) that He looks at you as if you had died and been raised with Christ, because you have, in a sense*. When it says you died with Christ…it means this: God

now sees you as free from anything you've done wrong, as if you had died on the Cross and paid. It's already paid…no condemnation. And what does "raised" mean? To be raised, at the right hand…Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God…is a metaphor, of course, but it's getting at something incredible. Think of what happened…when a King would send his son out into a dangerous mission, and the son would come back triumphant. He'd been noble, he'd been brave, he'd been loving, he'd been sacrificial, he'd been wise…so when the son comes back, the King's heart bursts with love and delight to see his son, so he puts him at his right hand…the place of honor. The highest, the greatest honor you could give a human being in that kingdom. Jesus has this place of honor, at the right hand of the Father…and we know about all the things Jesus has done…but it says "*you're raised with Him…you're seated with Him*." What that means is… that if you give yourself to Jesus Christ, God then delights in you as if you had done everything Jesus had done. God delights in you as much in you as He does in His own Son. If you say, "*that's the first time I've ever heard that*," **OK**! **OK**! But you've gotta start here.

Unless…unless you know these things…the way peoples' approval…the way family relationships…the way parental expectations…the way the world's emphasis on money and power and sexual beauty…those things… you're going to go look into those things, because you've got to get a sense of self…you've got to get a sense of worth…only if you know this can you begin to be free from those things. Those things that drive you with anxiety…that drive you with addictions…that DRIVE you. The only way is to first know that…. Do you believe that? That's the Gospel. The Gospel is *not* that we give God a good record and God blesses us, but rather that God, through Jesus Christ, gives us a perfect record and delights in us in Christ, and then we live for Him out of the freeness of that acceptance… that's the Gospel [5].

The New Identity

Then, you must **set your heart on that**. What does that mean? Let me give you the perfect example…the best I know of. Many, many years ago, there was a woman who lived…practically in a little trailer, right up the road from the little church in Virginia where I started my pastoral ministry. She came to the church for a while, and then moved away. She had become a Christian recently, came to my church…and she was going to a counselor because she'd had a very hard life. I remember very clearly that she certainly looked awful because she had been beaten over and over again, by one man after another man over the years. She had been in one abusive relationship after another. She showed the scars. But, she'd become a Christian, she was coming to church, she was going to a counselor, and I would visit her like the "*good little pastor boy*" I was at the time…25 or 26 years old….knowing almost nothing about how people's hearts worked. And even though she wasn't a very educated woman…what I'm going to read you here is a transcript of what I remember her saying…I wrote these things down because they were so weird and interesting and amazing to me at the time. But here's the sort of things she said as she was trying to tell me how Christ had turned her life around…and it was quite amazing. She said this, and again, I'm putting it in basically my own words…but these are all her thoughts:

I'm going to my counselor and much of what she has said is right. My counselor said I built my very significance and acceptability and identity on men. That's why I've been defenseless with them…I've simply needed them too much. All of that is right and helpful. However, my counselor doesn't have a very good solution for me. My counselor says what I should do instead is to get myself a great career. Get an education. Have a successful career. Well, my counselor means well and

of course I absolutely do need to get some training and get myself a job…and career…but what she's saying, is I should do that so I will also feel better about myself, by doing that. But, that would mean I would be switching from one kind of idol to another.

Now, I'd never thought about this…in my life…so I said, "*what are you talking about*?" to which she replied:

For many years, my heart has been looking at men and saying ***unless I'm successful at love I'm nothing****. But the therapist wants me to look at my career and say unless I'm a successful independent business woman who's in control of my own life, I am nothing. I don't want to be enslaved to my work as I was to men. I don't want to be as enslaved to my independence as I was to my dependence. I'm actually being asked to exchange a typical female idol for a typical male idol…and I don't want either.*

You see the therapist knew how to help her dig down into seeing what her idols were, but had no way of giving her anything but an alternate idol. And so I said "*what are you doing? I mean, how are you doing*?" And she actually quoted Colossians 3…*when Christ who is your life appears, you will be glorified.* She said (and it was actually very practical):

..when I go to church…when I'm in worship…when what Jesus did for me is so real, and so wonderful, in my heart I think of the men in my life, and I say…I speak to them, and I say this…'I'm glad to know you…and I certainly wouldn't mind being married, but you are not my life. Christ is my life. I'm done making anything else my life. You're a good thing but you're not an ultimate thing. I would love to have a husband, but if I don't, I've got Jesus. And I set my mind on things above. You can't give me any of the things that Jesus has given me.' See, I don't want to look to

men OR a career…a career can't die for me. If I live for a career and fail it'll beat me up all my life for having been a failure. But if I fail Jesus, He died for me…to forgive me.

See, she realized something. Jesus is the only Savior who, if you get Him, will satisfy you, and if you fail Him, and we do fail Him, can die for you. In other words…here's why this works. This is not just cognitive therapy… this is not just will therapy…religious people, when they get downcast… tend to put the emphasis on the will…and they say, "*buck up…be strong*." Non-religious people, in the secular world, when they're downcast, put all the emphasis on the emotions…and they say, "*feel better about yourself… do something nice for yourself*." There's another kind of therapy that essentially uses the head…uses the mind and says, "*well, now…you realize you're doing wrong thinking…that's self-defeating thinking…and you need to do this kind of thinking…*" But, *the real solution is* ***worship***.

Worship & Why It Works

What's interesting about what she would do…she didn't say that she just walked around and thought about it…she said, during worship, *when what Jesus Christ has done for me is real to me*…and that's what Paul is saying. Paul says *you died. You were raised.* He's going to the past. He says, '*go back into what Jesus has done for you…go back into the story… you're there…He's doing that for you'*. If you saw an artist who'd done a beautiful sculpture…and he threw himself into the path of a bulldozer to die rather than to have the sculpture destroyed, you'd say, "*oh my gosh, obviously, if he's willing to die for a sculpture, then the sculpture must have been his life*." Jesus Christ died for us. We were His life. And when that moves you, when you see him doing that for you, when you see yourself as part of that story, as it is…it changes your heart. You can actually look at anything…things that cow you…things that make you

afraid, and say: "***You are not my life***!"

Paul's approach is always that way…in 2 Corinthians 8…Paul is trying to get his readers to be generous. He doesn't just say "*be generous*." He does not work directly on the will. He doesn't say "*oh how awful of you to keep all your money when there are so many poor people in need…*" he doesn't work on the emotions. He appeals to them by saying ***you know the generosity of Jesus Christ on the Cross. He was infinitely rich and became infinitely poor so that you, through His poverty, could become rich*** [6]. He is taking you back into the story. He is saying "*you were there. He was doing that for you.*"

Think about Jesus' generosity on the Cross—*that's how you become generous*…you don't get there by working the on will…or by working on emotions. In Ephesians 5, when Paul is trying to get men to be faithful to their wives…what does he say? *Be faithful to your wives….don't' you dare commit adultery*? No, instead he says, in effect, '*you know Jesus Christ, who was infinitely faithful to you when He went to the Cross. **He shoulda gone…He coulda gone…He certainly wanted to go**… but He stayed* (*on the Cross*)'. And because you know the infinitely, wonderful, faithful spousal love of Jesus Christ on the Cross, you now have the freedom…the freedom from the need to go to a prettier woman. Or, the freedom to need to have a lot of money. You're free from these things. Instead of just being generous…or being faithful because "*I want to do a good job, because I want to feel better about myself*"…**the Gospel utterly changes you in the heart**, at the root, and it frees you to live the self-sacrificial, happy, and peaceful life…that you can.

There was a recent movie review in the New York Times and the movie reviewer was writing about a certain class of movie that is really cool…like *It's A Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart and *Groundhog Day*

with Bill Murray…and he listed a bunch of them and called them "***metaphysical second chance comedies***. [xviii]" He said this about these *metaphysical second chance comedies*: "(this is) *…the kind of movie in which the laws of time and space are bent to give characters access to self-knowledge unavailable in ordinary circumstances"…*so they can transform themselves. A metaphysical second chance comedy in which the laws of time and space are bent so that characters that would otherwise be locked in their old selves get self-knowledge unavailable in ordinary circumstances…so they can change themselves. **Guess what**? The Gospel is telling you…your life can become a metaphysical second chance comedy because God has sent ***Christ into the world to literally change, bend, and break the laws of time and space*** to bring you a knowledge and power that would otherwise be utterly unavailable to you. TAKE IT!!

READING 3 – The Gospel

Isaiah 53:4-11; 54:1-5, 11-14

4 Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted.5 But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away. And who can speak of His descendants? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of My people He was stricken.9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the LORD makes His life a guilt offering, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in His hand. 11 After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities.

1 "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD. 2 "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. 3

For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities. 4 "Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. 5 For your Maker is your husband-- the LORD Almighty is His name-- the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth.

11 "O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. 12 I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. 13 All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace. 14 In righteousness you will be established: Tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear. Terror will be far removed; it will not come near you.

We've already said that the Gospel is not moral conformity (religion) neither is it self-discovery (secularism). It's something else. I'd like to look at this passage in Isaiah and recognize that there are three results of the Gospel that flow into our lives. **The Gospel brings**:

- Restructuring of your heart

- Removal of your sin

- Reversal of your values

Restructuring of Your Heart

Let's take a look at these three things: **the first**, Restructuring of Your Heart, actually comes from the second of the three passages, under the image of the barren woman (Is. 54:1-5). This part of the prophet Isaiah is

the Lord speaking…**which starts off in a starling way**: God says, "*Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy…*" (54:1).

We've got to stop, right away. Because, if we're going to understand the message of this passage, we have to ask ourselves: "***what was the significance of childbearing in those ancient cultures***." Let me put it in a nutshell. The more children you had, the better your family did. The more children you had, the more your land produced. The more your shop produced, because you had more labor…and the more income you had. Therefore, the number of children completely determined the fate of your family…its status in society…its security economically…**completely**.

Secondly, when you got old…if you didn't have adult children to live with…you literally starved to death. And, if you wanted to have three adult children when you got to old age, you needed to have about eight-to-ten…because that's all that would live to maturity.

Thirdly, if your whole tribe – your whole nation wasn't having lots and lots of children…the tribe next door would grow in greater population – and therefore come and conquer you. So you can see, if a group of women were around a well, drawing water, and one of them said, "*I think I only want to have one or two children*," the rest of them would say, "*what…do you have a death wish or something*?" And not only that, they would say, "*this isn't just about you…it's about all of us. Unless you have as many children as you possibly can, you're dooming us economically, militarily, politically…"*

Therefore, a woman who bore many children in those ancient cultures was a *national hero*. But, as we have been saying in the previous

chapters, ***the natural tendency of the human heart is to take good things and turn them into ultimate things***. In ancient cultures and non-Western traditional cultures today, the family is the ultimate thing. It was, what I've been calling … *an idol*. Women, who either didn't have children because they weren't married…or couldn't have children because of some physical impediment…*felt worthless*…and were regarded as worthless. If you want a perfect example of that, go to the book of Genesis where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, is seeking to have children…and she can't have children…and she says, "*give me children or I'll die*.[7]" That about sums it up…in those cultures.

I know what some of you are thinking: "*oh boy, I know about this… those ancient cultures really oppressed women*." And you're right. *But, I'm glad you brought that up*. The reason I'm glad you brought that up is that it gives me the occasion to **ask you a question** - and it is true that those ancient cultures oppressed women. **Let me ask you one question**: *why, do you think, that in those cultures, woman were not troubled with eating disorders at all*? Why am I asking you that? I'm trying to make a point.

The Bible tells us that all cultures are fallen…and that all cultures oppress… here's what they do. Every single culture puts "***it***" in front of men and women…certain objects…and says, "***If you don't have them you're nothing***." If you don't have them, you have no worth. If you don't have them, you have no significance. If you don't have them, your existence isn't justified. You **must have THEM**! And of course, ancient cultures and traditional cultures today make idols out of…how to put it… they have ***collectivist idols***. They say to women your worth depends completely on the family…you've gotta' have a family….you've gotta' be in a family.

But modern Western culture has ***individualistic idols***. And these Western, modern cultures say, is "*your worth is completely dependent on your individual assets (looks…career…money).*" Every culture is saying, "***if you don't have THAT…you're nothing***." When Rachel says, "*give me children or I die*," what she's really saying is "*childlessness means psychological and social death*."

It's very telling. If you build your identity on anything other than God - and you fail to get it, **it's psychological and sociological death**. Every culture that has ever existed, and exists today, is telling you to build your identity on something. Therefore, every culture is gonna' press you and crush you into the ground…**because every culture is cooperating with the part of the heart that wants to be its own *savior and lord***…that wants to justify itself. Every culture is crushing us into the ground in different ways…**and**, it's almost impossible, when everybody else is going after these objects, not to go along with them and be just as enslaved…and crushed as much as everyone else in the culture. I said, "***almost impossible***."

God says there's a way out…there's a way to <u>an emotional inner freedom and cultural freedom</u>. What is it? Looking at the text. Into this ancient culture God says: "*Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child*." Sing O barren woman? 'You must be kidding!! Do you know what's so culturally radical about this?…what God is calling women to do? **He's calling women to** an inner emotional freedom from shame and a cultural freedom – which come from external oppressive structures. God is saying, "*I can give you a freedom from men, from family, from what your culture tells you to build your identity on. '**I can get you to sing without children***.'

Look at the paradox. He says, "*Sing, O barren woman, you who never*

bore a child…because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband. ***What!?*****How could this be?** What this is saying is…*the woman who never had any children has more children than the woman who has had a lot of children*. **That doesn't make sense**…but it does make sense when you realize that children represent value…and worth…and beauty…and honor…and God is saying that ***there is a value, beauty, and honor available <u>apart from children</u>***.

Do you see how utterly radical that statement was in that ancient culture? What's its source? God says, "**Your Maker *is* your husband**." Your maker **IS** your husband. In the previous chapter, in Colossians 3, we looked at a very, very long theological exposition…but here Isaiah sums up what Paul said in this incredibly beautiful image and metaphor. How did Paul say it? What is Isaiah saying? What does the Bible say? The Bible says (with the exception of Christianity) that ***every religion says that life is about trying, trying, trying really hard to live up to standards****…and* ***if*** *you really try hard…..at the end of your life you'll have a positive verdict and you'll go to heaven or you'll meet God…or you'll have Nirvana or something*. Every other religion says "*try, try, try hard…live up to the standards and you'll get a good verdict and 'you're in.'*"

Christianity is absolutely different than that. <u>Christianity is a legal standing</u>. It's coming into something **now**. It is being united to God through Christ, and the perfect metaphor for it is marriage. Why? Because marriage, on the one hand is the most intense love relationship possible, **<u>and yet</u>** it's also a legal status. A status…which - the moment before you take your vows, you do not have at all…and the second you take your vows, you have completely. It's not like you try, try, try…your Maker "is your husband." Christianity offers something that no religion

dares to offer…and says that when you're joined to God through Jesus Christ, **the verdict is in …NOW!** *You have the applause…the praise… the delight of God now*. No religion even begins to offer such things. So what exactly is God saying in this passage?

He's saying: ***Don't look to anything else….I can be your value***. *And what greater value could you possibly have than to be delighted in and sacrificed for by the Maker of the universe*? He says, '*look at all these other things. Good things that you're turning into ultimate things. Don't try to get your value and your beauty and your honor and your significance from them…don't do that…you need freedom from them, so you can love them. And you'll find that freedom only when your heart rests in Me…the way you rest in bed at the end of a long day…only when your heart savors Me*"…*the way you savor a glass of cold water in the middle of the desert*. **IF** you have that, then you will have a completely different sort of identity. You'll have cultural freedom. You'll have emotional freedom. Or, you can *live-on* in your culture…and every culture says "*these are good things…*" *every culture has its themes…every culture has its emphases…every culture has its strengths*…**but they will enslave you**…they will crush you. **But**, if you are united to God through Christ…*you'll be restructured…in your heart and in your identity*. Some people would likely say, '*Wow, that's very radical…**but**…I think I already believe in God…I believe in Christianity…yet I don't know that I've ever undergone anything quite like that*." Ok, let's keep going.

The restructuring of the heart flows from an understanding of how the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells you about the removal of your sin. And as we look to the image of the barren woman in regards to the restructuring of the heart, we look to the first portion of the Scripture - to the image of the Suffering Servant…to understand the removal of our sin.

Removal of Your Sin

This portion of our text (Is.**53:4-11) is very famous,** but I also want you to know it probably is the **most shocking and controversial passage** in all of the Hebrew Scriptures…all of the Old Testament. It has been fought about and it has been debated for centuries. And, the reason is… it seems to be so shocking, in that it seems to contradict all sorts of other texts in the rest of the Bible. Let's take a look at it.

First of all, it's shocking because of the violence of this death…***the violence of this death***. All through the Old Testament, there were prophecies about a Messiah…a messianic figure, someone who would come and bring God's ***peace*** *back to the world…* someone who would come and bring God's ***justice*** *back to the world*. All the way from the Book of Exodus until the early chapters of the Book of Isaiah, we find a prince, this ***mimshach***, this anointed prince, this person…this figure… who in prophecy is going to return. However, when you get to the middle of Isaiah, into chapter 40 and afterward, this ***servant of the Lord*** appears, and He brings salvation to the nations (this is been spoken of in chapters 42, 47, and 50); so there are a number of these prophecies about this Servant of the Lord who's going to bring salvation to the nations.

However, when we get to chapter 53, **the most appalling thing happens**. The Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, who is supposed to bring an end to violence and injustice, <u>is instead the victim of violence and injustice</u>. Look at verse 8. "*By oppression and judgment He was taken away. And who can speak of His descendants? For He was cut off from the land of the living;"* The <u>cut off</u> from the land of the living is a Hebrew term for '**a violent death**'…then verse 5…*He was stricken for the transgression of my people*…<u>stricken</u> is literally, '**pierced through**.' The verb means '*to be run through*'… to have something come into the

front of your body and go out the back. It is a term that describes **the most painful and excruciating possible death**. Now this *seems to contradict* everything else we know about the Messiah. It seems to contradict everything else that we see…how can this be the Messiah? How could the Messiah possibly bring an end to violence and an end to injustice and bring an end to brokenness in the world…by being broken to bits Himself? That makes no sense at all.

The **second thing** that's shocking…even more shocking…is the **vicariousness of this death**. Look at verse 10: "*Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush Him; He has put Him to grief; when His soul makes an offering for sin* (**literally, guilt offering**). Whoa…stop…wait… WHAT? The Bible references much about offerings…about guilt offerings - in the tabernacle…animal sacrifices. When someone was guilty of sin, you offered an animal sacrifice…an animal was slain and offered up - it took away the guilt…and we find this throughout the Old Testament. **But**…one thing was absolutely and totally clear in the Bible; *that never ever…ever was there to be a* ***human sacrifice***. Human sacrifice was in no uncertain terms condemned…everywhere else in the Old Testament. And yet - that's what this is. "*But He was* ***wounded*** *for our transgressions; He was* ***crushed*** *for our iniquities;* ***upon Him was the chastisement*** *that brought us peace, and with His* ***stripes*** *we are healed.* Our just punishment had gone to Him…His peace has come to us. He was THE guilt offering, and yet the Bible says everywhere else…you must not do human sacrifice.

So - *first* the violence of the death is shocking, and *then* the vicariousness of the death is shocking, and **last of all**, *the voluntariness of the death is shocking*. Look at verse 4: "*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows…***literally** that means, ***He picked them up and put***

them on Himself. He is voluntarily dying - but everywhere in the Bible suicide is a sin. So this contradicts (1) what the Bible says about the power of the Messiah…(2) it contradicts what the Bible says about the forbiddeness of human sacrifice…(3) it contradicts what the Bible says about the sinfulness of suicide. How do we make sense of this passage?

Some scholars and theologians have tried very hard to make sense of it by saying, *it's all symbol…it's all figurative. It's poetry. And the servant here is a poetic - symbolic personification of the suffering of the nation… of the sufferings of the people. This is talking about the people of God… the nation of God and how they suffered.* **Ok**, **but** there's a huge problem with that interpretation. *Even poetry has to have a point*. And what is the point of this passage? The point of this passage is that ***the servant suffers instead of the nation***. The servant suffers so the nation doesn't have to suffer. So - if the servant is just a symbol for the nation, how can the nation suffer so the nation won't suffer? How can the nation suffer in place of the nation? **Nope…that's not logical**! This is a human being…this is an individual human being. But who? How can we make any sense out of it? Well, it all depends upon who this is. Who is it?

Centuries later, after Isaiah, in the Book of Acts, chapter 8 we read an account of something that happened many years after Isaiah wrote. Acts 8 tells us about an African …an Ethiopian…who'd gone all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem in order to worship God. And in this text he's on his way back *home*…AND, he's reading the scroll of Isaiah. Even the little introduction tells us an awful lot about what happened to this man. First of all, in those days, even today, I'm sure, but in those days, the trip from Ethiopia to Jerusalem was enormously long…incredibly dangerous…and terribly difficult. The only possible reason an individual would go all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem in order to worship was if *this person*

was deeply, spiritually dissatisfied. He was searching. He was seeking. There was a great spiritual need…a longing…an emptiness, let's say. **That's the first thing we know**.

The second thing we know is that he's on his way back to Ethiopia – and more significantly, he'd been *turned away at the temple…* in Jerusalem , the place of worship…which of course, poses the question, why would he have been turned away? Answer: ***because he was a eunuch***. The Mosaic Law made it clear that nothing deformed - nothing diseased could go into the presence of God. This man had been castrated, and anyone who had been castrated was absolutely forbidden to go into the temple. *…after all those years…and miles…who knows…hundreds… thousands*…who knows? After all that way - he was turned away…**unfit… unclean**. The reason he was castrated was that he was an official that served Ethiopian royalty. In those days, in all ancient kingdoms, if you were an official that was going to work in close quarters with the royal family… castration was required. And of course, it was **a terrible price to pay…in a culture in which having descendants** meant everything. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why he was spiritually searching. But he'd been turned away.

He was on his way back home and we're told that he was reading the Book of Isaiah…and Acts 8 tells us that Philip, a minister of the Gospel…a missionary, found this Ethiopian, and this is what happened:

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so He did not open His mouth. In His humiliation He was deprived of justice. Who can speak of His descendants? For His life was taken from the earth."

Imagine how electrifying this must have been for a man who had just been turned away from the house of God because he couldn't have descendants. And yet in this Isaiah passage, the Ethiopian learns that the '*Servant of the Lord*' had voluntarily taken on this condition. The text continues: "*The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, Himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and* ***told him the good news about Jesus***." **About Jesus!**

Jesus…**the answer to all the riddles**. ***If*** this figure, this Suffering Servant is the Son of God, who comes down from heaven in human form – we can then unravel a multitude of riddles. **First**, it explains the voluntariness of the death; it was <u>not suicide</u>. Why is it not suicide? You and I…we didn't give ourselves life, and therefore we can't take our own life - because our lives don't belong to us…they belong to God. <u>But God's life is His own</u>, and <u>He laid it down</u> ***for us.***

S**econdly**, it explains the vicariousness of the death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has written: "***Forgiveness is a form of suffering***." Can you grasp that statement's implication? If someone has really, really wronged you…***you've got to forgive them***. If you don't forgive them, you'll be eaten up with bitterness…and you'll become part of the endless cycle of retaliation that makes the world the mess of a place that it is. So you've got to forgive. But, Bonhoeffer's right. Forgiveness is agonizing. **When you want to pay somebody back** but you don't pay them back, **you pay**. When you want to make them suffer but you don't make them

suffer…because you're trying to forgive them…you suffer. Real forgiveness always entails suffering. There is no such thing as forgiveness without suffering. Not if you've really been wronged.

And, if that is true for us, with our miniscule and flawed sense of justice, how much more would it be true of God? With Philip's help, the Ethiopian eunuch realized…**this is God suffering** in order to forgive us. If God was not going to pay us back, then He had to pay. Just like with us. When the eunuch realized **God underwent a violent, voluntary, vicarious death to forgive him and receive him**, **it changed his life**.

Here's why it changed his life. Think about this! We've already said that the *Gospel is not moral conformity or self-discovery*; it is *not moralism or relativism*. Because you see, **moralistic people** have a God who is sort of holy and demanding. And the way you have a relationship with this '***moralistic god***' is you try very, very hard. But when people have a *god* who's basically holy and demanding…and they think they're pleasing '*him*' through moral behavior…when they think of their relationship with God, it doesn't move them to tears…it doesn't galvanize them…electrify them…it doesn't change them from the inside out…they just say, "*yes, yes, of course I know God…I work very hard to please Him…to meet His moral demands…you know*."

And then there are people, *big city folk* basically, who think…'*you know, if there is a God, I believe He loves everyone…He excludes no one…He accepts everyone…yeah, I have a relationship with God…I'm spiritual…because God loves everyone…that's His job*.' **But** - if that's what you believe…if *your* God is one who just accepts and loves everyone…if that's what you believe…when you think of your relationship with God, it doesn't galvanize you…it doesn't move you to tears…it

doesn't electrify you…it doesn't change you from the inside out. So - you say - "***well…of course He loves me…He loves everybody***."

However, the Biblical God, the God of the Gospel, the God of Isaiah, the God of the African eunuch, ***is infinitely holy and infinitely loving***. Offenses in the face of the infinitely holy and infinitely loving God DEMAND payment. The cost is as great as the demand. It's the reason why God's grace…His unmerited favor toward us is so costly…and why it's so moving. God's grace is so infinitely costly that ***it must melt your heart*** as you mentally and emotionally grasp the reality that God was so holy that He couldn't shrug evil off – **but**…He was so loving that He wouldn't punish us for it. **Not until** you're humbled down into the dust, because He's so holy that **He HAD TO DIE FOR YOU**, and **not until** you're affirmed and valued into the sky… because He loves you so much He was glad to die for you…not until THEN *will you be humbled out of the pride that makes you look down on other people, and simultaneously be affirmed out of the self-hatred that makes you look down on yourself…at the same time.*

Only when you see what it cost God to remove your sin will you finally experience the death of all inferiority and all superiority. You'll be able to have real freedom along with a restructured identity of your very own… it's impossible to have it any other way. Sure, if you're a moralist you feel good when you're living up to your standards, and you're proud…or you feel bad when you're not living up….and you hate yourself. **But here**, proud is gone…and self-hatred is gone…because the Gospel says: you're so **humbled** in your recognition of your sinful status… *but* so **bold** because you are absolutely loved…***at the same time***. The Gospel gives you a radical new identity.

It's the removal of sin and the costliness of it…when the

substitutionary death of Jesus Christ is intellectually coherent ***and*** *existentially melting to your heart, that's when the change has happened.* That comes ONLY when you see that God is not just holy and demanding…or not just loving and accepting of everybody…but that He's infinitely holy and infinitely loving at the same time - and therefore His grace is costly. ***When that melts your heart - it changes you***.

You know the book -*A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens… one of the major story lines is about Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay…two men who both love the same young woman…but she marries Charles. They get married and start having children…but, this is during the French Revolution…and Charles Darnay is arrested and he's taken to prison…and awaits his execution. On the night before his execution, Sidney Carton, who looks quite a bit like Charles Darnay, steals into the prison and says, '*look Charles, you have a wife…you have a child…let's switch places… let's change clothes…I'll die in your place*,' and Charles Darnay says, "*No way!! Are you kidding? I'd never let you do such a thing*." So what does Sydney Carton do? He smacks Darnay over the head…knocks him out cold…then he puts his own clothes on Darnay… *Sidney 's peace passes to Charles, and Charles' punishment passes to Sydney* . Then Sidney has friend take Charles…who's now out cold… they take him out of the prison…and Sidney assumes Charles' place in the prison, waiting to be executed.

There's also a young seamstress in the prison…also for execution… and she knew Charles Darnay…when she learned he was there…she sought him out…went up to him and started talking…. "*Your remember this…you remember that*?" And of course, Sidney Carton was looking away hoping that she wouldn't look too closely…and suddenly she did see…and she realized it wasn't Charles Darnay. And **her eyes got big**!!!

And she asked, "Are you dying for him? And he said, "*shhhhh, yes…and for his wife and children*." And she said, "*stranger, I've been feeling that I'm NOT going to be able to face my own death…but…could I hold your hand…because if someone as brave and as loving as you holds my hand…I…think…I'll be ok*?" And Sidney Carton said, "*all right*." Now, he wasn't even dying for her, but his substitutionary sacrifice strengthened her to her roots. How much more will the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ FOR YOU…absolutely change you and strengthen you if you would just let it? Have its way with you? In your memories…in your attitude…in your personality…in the way in which you look at the world… in the way in which you look at life. To the degree you understand the love and the holiness of God…that makes the grace so costly…and that you understand what it cost God to remove your sin…that will create *that restructuring of your heart*. And **one more thing**…it will create…and that's a complete reversal of values.

Reversal of Values (chapter 54, the barren woman and the deserted city)

Out of the flow of the removal of sin we in chapter 53, we see in chapter 54 two images: (1) a barren woman, who is singing for joy, and (2) a deserted city…an afflicted city. This is talking about a city that is poor…that is devastated…and God says "*I will rebuild your walls…and I will rebuild your gates…and I will rebuild your battlement towers…and I will rebuild them out of sapphire…and out of rubies…and out of diamonds*." **Now imagine, a city like that**. You realize that a city made out of diamonds and sapphires and rubies would be, **first of all**, absolutely militarily and politically secure, because nobody could break down walls made of that. **Secondly**, it would have been incredibly economically prosperous- because it would be the most valuable and

wealthy city in the world. And, then thirdly, it would also be a place of ascetic beauty…its artistic life and its economic life…and its political life would be flourishing. And, of course, this has never happened…we don't think. I mean, Jerusalem was rebuilt after the exile, but it wasn't built like that. What is Isaiah foreseeing?

You have to go to the book of Revelation…in which the Apostle John depicts the end of time. There…we see coming out of heaven…this city, with sapphires and rubies and diamonds as its base…and what is that? What is that vision all about? What is Isaiah talking about…what is the book of Revelation talking about? It's talking about…that at the end of time…God's power will come down to renew the world…re-create the world…to be the way God meant it to be…He didn't want disease…He didn't want suffering, He didn't want death…He didn't want poverty…He didn't want racism…He didn't want injustice…He didn't want any of those things, and in the end He's going to make the world renewed…the way it ought to be. How can we be a part of that…to look forward to that kind of city? ***Through the Gospel***. Why does God always seem to work with eunuchs and barren women…why Sarah over Hagar? Why stupid Jacob over Esau? Why little David over the big strapping older brothers? Why does He always do that? Why? Here's how one writer put it:

Christ wins our salvation through losing. He achieves power through weakness and service. He comes to wealth by giving everything away. Those who receive his salvation also are not the strong and the accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost. Salvation, because it is achieved through weakness and it is received through weakness, pulls off a complete reversal of the values of this world with regard to power, recognition, status and wealth. When we understand that we are saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking

*salvation in these things (*in power, recognition, status and wealth*). The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, therefore liberates us from the bondage to the power of material things and worldly status in our lives. The Gospel therefore creates a people with an upside-down set of values, a whole alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition: all these things are marks of living in the world and are the opposite of the mindset of people whose lives have been changed by the Gospel.*

When you see what it cost God to remove your sin…when you get that restructuring of identity it will lead to a reversal of values…**OR**, you really haven't had that restructuring of identity. You will look at people of other races differently than you did before…because you've got cultural freedom…you no longer make an idol out of your culture. You look at your own money differently than you did before. You don't need to have lots of it anymore, because that's not how you get your security and your significance. You will start to pour yourself out to bring about, bit by bit by bit the city that God is building, and eventually will bring to completion at the end of time. **What if** we really were a church filled with people who had all three of these results in our lives? *The reversal of values, the removal of sin, and the restructuring of identity*…what would we look like. Some people would say, "*oh, that's a conservative church… because of all that talk about substitutionary atonement…you know, and all that doctrinal stuff*," and other people would say, "*oh, no no no, it's a liberal church, look at all that talk about social justice…and concern for the poor*." And other people would say "*that must be a charismatic church…because of…'look at all that love*'*…and all that singing, 'O barren woman' stuff*."

You know what I really love? It doesn't say, *O think O barren woman…now you know the truth*. Sing. Artistically drill it into your heart until it catches fire. We would be all of those things…we'd be conservative…we'd be charismatic…we'd be liberal (it means generous). We'd be all of those things…and more because ***the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.***

READING 4 - WHERE IS YOUR FAITH?

Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Preached March 14, 1954

Luke 8:22-25 *One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they set out, [23] and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were in danger. [24] And they went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm. [25] He said to them,* ***"Where is your faith****?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him*?"

I WANT to call attention particularly to this question which was addressed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to the disciples. He said to them: 'Where is your faith?' Indeed I would call your attention to this entire incident as a part of our consideration of the subject of spiritual depression. We have already considered a number of causes of the condition and this particular incident in the life and ministry of our Lord brings us face-to-face with yet another cause.

The Nature of Faith

The one that is dealt with here is the whole problem and question of the nature of faith. In other words, there are many Christians who get into difficulty and are unhappy from time to time because they clearly have not understood the nature of faith. *'Well'*, you may say, *'if they have not understood the nature of faith, how can they be Christians*?' The answer is that what makes one a Christian is that one is given the **gift of faith**. We are given the gift of faith by

God through the Holy Spirit and we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and that saves us; but that does not mean that we have fully understood the nature of faith. So it comes to pass that, while we may be truly Christian and genuinely saved through receiving this gift of faith, we may subsequently get into trouble with our spiritual experience because we have not understood what faith really is. It is given as a gift, but from there on we have to do certain things about it. Now this very striking incident brings out the vital importance of distinguishing between the original gift of faith and the walk of faith, or the life of faith which comes subsequently. God starts us off in this Christian life and then we have to walk in it. *'We walk by faith, not by sight'*, is the theme that we are now considering.

Before I come actually to that particular theme, I must say a few words about this great incident in and of itself. Looked at from any standpoint it is a very interesting and important incident. It has a great deal to tell us, for instance, about the Person of our Lord Himself. It brings us face to face with what is described as a paradox, the seeming contradiction in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. There He was, weary and tired, so tired, in fact, that He fell asleep. Now this incident is recorded by the three so-called synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it is really important from the standpoint of understanding the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Look at Him. There is no doubt about His humanity, He is fatigued, He is tired and weary, so much so that He just falls asleep, and, though the storm has arisen, He still goes on sleeping. He is subject to infirmity; He is a man in the body and flesh like all the rest of us. Ah, yes, but wait a minute. They came to Him and awoke Him saying: '*Master, Master, we are perishing*.' Then He arose and rebuked the wind and the raging of the sea, and they ceased and there was a calm—Matthew's gospel describes it as *'a great calm'*. Now it is not surprising that the disciples, seeing all this, wondered and said one to another: 'What manner of Man is this! For He commandeth even the winds and water and they obey Him' (KJV). **Man, and yet obviously God**. He

could command the elements; He could silence the wind and stop the raging of the sea. He is the Lord of nature and of creation; He is the Lord of the universe. This is the mystery and the marvel of Jesus Christ—God and Man, two natures in One Person, two natures unmixed yet resident in the same Person.

The Unique Deity of Jesus Christ

We must start here, because if we are not clear about that there is no purpose in our going on. If you do not believe in the unique deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, you are not a Christian, whatever else you may be. We are not looking at a good Man only, we are not interested merely in the greatest Teacher the world has ever seen; we are face to face with the fact that God, the Eternal Son, has been in this world and that He took upon Himself human nature and dwelt amongst us, a Man amongst men—God-Man. We are face-to-face with the mystery and the marvel of the Incarnation and of the Virgin Birth. It is all here, and it shines out in all the fullness of its amazing glory. *'What manner of Man is this*?' He is more than Man. That is the answer—He is also God.

However, that is not, it seems to me, the special purpose of this particular incident. You get that revelation in other places also, it shines out right through all the Gospels; but the separate particular incidents in which it is seen, and generally also have some special and peculiar message of their own to teach us. In this case there can be no doubt that that message is the lesson with regard to the disciples and their condition at this point—it is the great lesson concerning faith and the nature or the character of faith. I do not know what you feel, but I never cease to be grateful to these disciples. I am grateful for the record of every mistake they ever made, and for every blunder they ever committed, because I see myself in them. How grateful we should be to God that we have these Scriptures, how grateful to Him that He has not merely given us the gospel and left it at that. How wonderful it is that we can read accounts like this and see ourselves depicted in them, and how grateful we should be to God that it is a

divinely inspired Word which speaks the truth, and shows and pictures every human frailty.

So we find our Lord rebuking these men. He rebukes them because of their alarm, because of their terror, because of their lack of faith. Here they were in the boat with Him, and the storm arose, and soon they were in difficulties. They bailed out the water, but the boat was filling up and they could see that in a few moments it was going to sink. They had done everything they could but it did not seem to be of any avail, and what amazed them was that the Master was still sleeping soundly in the stern of the vessel. So they awoke Him and said: 'Master, Master, carest Thou not that we perish?'—are You unconcerned about it all? And He arose, and having rebuked the wind and the sea, He rebuked them.

Now we must be careful to observe this rebuke and to understand what He was saying. In the first place, He was rebuking them for being in such a state at all. 'Where is your faith?' He says. Matthew puts it: '0 ye of little faith!' Here as elsewhere 'He marveled at their unbelief'. He rebuked them for being in that state of agitation and terror and alarm while He was with them in the boat. That is the first great lesson we have to apply to ourselves and to one another. It is very wrong for a Christian ever to be in such a condition. I do not care what the circumstances may be, the Christian should never be agitated, the Christian should never be beside himself like this, the Christian should never be at his wit's end, and the Christian should never be in a condition in which he has lost control of himself. That is the first lesson, a lesson we have emphasized before because it is an essential part of the New Testament teaching. A Christian should never, like the worldly person, be depressed, agitated, alarmed, frantic, not knowing what to do. It is the typical reaction to trouble of those who are not Christian, that is why it is so wrong to be like that. The Christian is different from other people, the Christian has something which the non-Christian does not possess, and the ideal for the Christian is that which is stated so perfectly by the

Apostle Paul in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians: 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content . . . I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me'. That is the Christian position, that is what the Christian is meant to be like. The Christian is never meant to be carried away by his feelings, whatever they are—never. That is always wrong in a Christian. He is always to be controlled, as I hope to show you. The trouble with these men was that they were lacking in self-control. That is why they were miserable, that is why they were unhappy, that is why they were alarmed and agitated, though the Son of God was with them in the boat. I cannot emphasize this point too strongly. I lay it down as a simple proposition that a Christian should never lose self-control, should never be in a state of agitation or terror or alarm, whatever the circumstances. That is obviously our first lesson. The position of these people was alarming. They were in jeopardy and it looked as if they were going to be drowned the next moment, but our Lord says in effect: 'You should not be in that condition. As My followers you have no right to be in such a state even though you are in jeopardy'.

That is the first great lesson, and the second is, that what is so wrong about being in this condition is that it implies a lack of trust and of confidence in Him. That is the trouble and that is why it is so reprehensible. That is why He reprimanded these men at that point. He said in effect: 'Do you feel like this in spite of the fact that I am with you? Do you not trust Me?' Mark reports them as saying: 'Master, carest Thou not that we perish?' Now I do not think that they were referring only to themselves or to their own safety. I do not think that they were so self-centered. I do not think that they simply meant: Don't You care that we are going to drown? without considering Him at all. I believe they were including Him as well, that they thought they were all going to be drowned. 'Master, carest Thou not that we perish?' But still, this agitation and alarm always carries with it a lack of implicit trust and confidence in Him. It is a lack of faith in His concern for us and in His care for us. It means that we take charge and are going to look after

the situation ourselves, feeling either that He does not care, or perhaps that He cannot do anything. That is what makes this so terrible, but I wonder whether we always realize it. It seems obvious as we look at it objectively in the case of these disciples; but when you and I are agitated or disturbed and do not know what to do, and are giving the impression of great nervous tension, anybody looking at us is entitled to say: 'That person has not much faith in his or her Lord. There does not seem to be much point in being a Christian after all, there is not much value in Christianity as I see it in that person'. Now during the war we were all subject to these trials in an exceptional way, but even now in days of peace anything that comes across our path and puts us in difficulty, at once shows whether we believe in Him and trust in Him, by our response and reaction to it. There seems to me, therefore, on the very surface to be these two great lessons. We must never allow ourselves to be agitated and disturbed whatever the circumstances because to do so implies a lack of faith, a lack of trust, a lack of confidence in our blessed Lord and God.

However, let us look at the passage in detail; let us now draw some general principles out of the incident and its great teaching. First of all, in looking at this whole question of faith, let me say a word about what! might call 'the trial of faith'. Scripture is full of this idea of the trial of one's faith. Take the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. That is, in a sense, nothing but a great exposition of this theme of the trial of faith. Every one of those men was tried. They had been given great promises and they had accepted them, and then everything seemed to go wrong. It is true of all of them. Think of the trial of a man like Noah, the trial of a man like Abraham, the trials that men like Jacob and especially Moses had to endure. God gives the gift of faith and then the faith is tried. Peter, in his First Epistle in the first chapter, says exactly the same thing. He says: 'Though ye are in heaviness for a season' because of certain circumstances, the object of that is 'that the trial of your faith which is more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found

unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ'. That is the theme of all the Scriptures. You find it in the history of the Patriarchs and of all the Old Testament saints; you find it running through the New Testament. Indeed, it is peculiarly the theme of the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

Let us then be clear about this. We must start by understanding that we may well find ourselves in a position in which our faith is going to be tried. Storms and trials are allowed by God. If we are living the Christian life, or trying to live the Christian life, at the moment, on the assumption that it means just come to Christ and you will never have any more worry in the whole of your life, we are harboring a terrible fallacy. In fact it is a delusion and it is not true. Our faith will be tried, and James goes so far as to say: 'Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations (trials)' (James 1.2). God permits storms, He permits difficulties, He permits the wind to blow and the billows to roll, and everything may seem to be going wrong and we ourselves to be in jeopardy. We must learn and realize that God does not take His people and lead them into some kind of Elysium in which they are protected from all 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Not at all, we are living in the same world as everybody else. Indeed, the Apostle Paul seems to go further than that. He tells the Philippians: 'Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake' (Philippians I. 29). 'In the world', says our Lord, 'ye shall have tribulation but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world' (John 16- 33). 'Be of good cheer'—yes, but remember that you will have the tribulation. Paul and Barnabas going on their missionary journey visited the churches and warned them, 'that we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God ' (Acts 14. 22).

We must start by realizing that 'to be forewarned is to be forearmed' in this matter. If we have a magical conception of the Christian life, we are certain to find ourselves in trouble, because, when difficulties come, we shall be tempted

to ask: 'Why is this allowed?' And we should never ask such a question. If we but realized this fundamental truth, we never would ask it. Our Lord goes to sleep and allows the storm to come. The position may indeed become quite desperate and we may appear to be in danger of our lives. Everything may seem to be against us, yet—well here it is, a Christian poet has said it for us:

'When all things seem against us To drive us to despair'...

But it does not drive him to despair because he goes on to say:

'We know one gate is open One ear will hear our prayer'.

But things may be desperate: 'All things seem against us, to drive us to despair'. Let us then be prepared for that. Yes, but we must go further. While all this is happening to us, our Lord appears to be utterly unconcerned about us. That is where the real trial of faith comes in. The wind and the billows were bad enough and the water coming into the ship. That was terrible, but the thing that to them was most terrible of all was His apparent unconcern. Still sleeping and not apparently caring. 'Master, carest Thou not that we perish?' He appears to be unconcerned, unconcerned about us, unconcerned about Himself, unconcerned about His cause, unconcerned about His Kingdom. Just imagine the feelings of these men. They had followed Him and listened to His teaching about the coming of the Kingdom, they had seen His miracles and were expecting marvelous things to happen; and now it looked as if everything was going to come to an end in shipwreck and drowning. What an anti-climax and all because of His unconcern! We must be very young indeed in the Christian life if we do not know something about this. Do we not all know something of this position of trial and difficulty, yes, and of a feeling that God somehow does not seem to care? He does not do anything about it. 'Why does He allow me, a Christian, to suffer at the hands of a non-Christian?' says many a person. 'Why does He allow things to go wrong with me and not with the other person?' 'Why is that man

successful while I am unsuccessful? Why does not God do something about it?' How often do Christian people ask such questions. They have asked it about the whole state of the Church today. 'Why does He not send revival? Why does He allow these rationalists and atheists to take the ascendancy? Why does He not break in and do something, and revive His work?' How often we are tempted to say such things, exactly as these disciples in the boat were!

The fact that God permits these things and that He often appears to be quite unconcerned about it all really constitutes what I am describing as the trial of faith. Those are the conditions in which our faith is tried and tested, and God allows it all, God permits it all. James even tells us to 'count it all joy' when these things happen to us. This is a great subject—the trial of faith. We do not talk much about it these days, do we? But if we went back to the seventeenth or eighteenth century we would find that it was then a very familiar theme. I suppose that in many ways it was the central theme of the Puritans. It was certainly prominent later on in the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century. The trial of man's faith and how to overcome these things, the walk of faith, and the life of faith, was their constant theme.

Let us now go on to the second question—What is the nature of faith, the character of faith? This is above everything the particular message of this incident and I feel that it is brought Out especially clearly in this record of it in the Gospel according to St. Luke. That is why I am taking the incident from that particular Gospel and emphasizing the way in which our Lord puts the question: 'Where is your faith?' There is the key to the whole problem. You observe our Lord's question. It seems to imply that He knows perfectly well that they have faith. The question He asks them is: 'Where is it? You have got faith, but where is it at this moment? It ought to be here, where is it?' Now that gives us the key to the understanding of the nature of faith.

Let me first of all put it negatively. Faith, obviously, is not a mere matter of

feeling. It cannot be, because one's feelings in this kind of condition can be very changeable. A Christian is not meant to be dejected when everything goes wrong. He is told to 'rejoice'. Feelings belong to happiness alone, rejoicing takes in something much bigger than feelings; and if faith were a matter of feelings only, then when things go wrong and feelings change, faith will go. But faith is not a matter of feelings only, faith takes up the whole man including his mind, his intellect and his understanding. It is a response to truth, as we shall see.

The second thing is still more important. Faith is not something that acts automatically, faith is not something that acts magically. This, I think, is the blunder of which we have all, at some time or another, been guilty. We seem to think that faith is something that acts automatically. Many people, it seems to me, conceive of faith as if it were something similar to those thermostats which you have in connection with a heating apparatus, you set your thermostat at a given level, you want to maintain the temperature at a certain point and it acts automatically. If the temperature is tending to rise above that, the thermostat comes into operation and brings it down; if you use your hot water and the temperature is lowered, the thermostat comes into operation and sends it up, etc. You do not have to do anything about it, the thermostat acts automatically and it brings the temperature back to the desired level automatically. Now there are many people who seem to think that faith acts like that. They assume that it does not matter what happens to them, that faith will operate and all will be well. Faith, however, is not something that acts magically or automatically. If it did, these men would never have been in trouble, faith would have come into operation and they would have been calm and quiet and all would have been well. But faith is not like that and those are utter fallacies with respect to it.

What is faith? Let us look at it positively. The principle taught here is that faith is an activity, it is something that has to be exercised. It does not come into operation itself, you and I have to put it into operation. It is a form of activity.

Now let me divide that up a little. Faith is something you and I have to bring into operation. That is exactly what our Lord said to these men. He said: 'Where is your faith?' which means, 'Why are you not taking your faith and applying it to this position?' You see, it was because they did not do so, because they did not put their faith into operation, that the disciples had become unhappy and were in this state of consternation. How then does one put faith into operation? What do I mean by saying that faith is something we have to apply? I can divide my answer in this way. The first thing I must do when I find myself in a difficult position is to refuse to allow myself to be controlled by the situation. A negative, you see. These men were in the boat, the Master was asleep and the billows were rolling, the water was coming in, and they could not bale it out fast enough. It looked as if they were going to sink, and their trouble was that they were controlled by that situation. They should have applied their faith and taken charge of it, and said: 'No, we are not going to panic'. They should have started in that way, but they did not do so. They allowed the position to control them.

Faith is a refusal to panic. Do you like that sort of definition of faith? Does that seem to be too earthly and not sufficiently spiritual? It is of the very essence of faith. Faith is a refusal to panic, come what may. Browning, I think had that idea when he defined faith like this: 'With me, faith means perpetual unbelief kept quiet, like the snake 'neath Michael's foot'. Here is Michael and there is the snake beneath his foot, and he just keeps it quiet under the pressure of his foot. Faith is unbelief kept quiet, kept down. That is what these men did not do, they allowed this situation to grip them, and they became panicky. Faith, however, is a refusal to allow that. It says: 'I am not going to be controlled by these circumstances—I am in control'. So you take charge of yourself, and pull yourself up, you control yourself. You do not let yourself go, you assert yourself.

That is the first thing, but it does not stop at that. That is not enough, because that may be nothing but resignation. That is not the whole of faith. Having taken

that first step, having pulled yourself up, you then remind yourself of what you believe and what you know. That again is something these foolish disciples did not do. If only they had stopped a moment and said: 'Now then what about it? Is it possible that we are going to drown with Him in the boat? Is there anything He cannot do? We have seen His miracles, He turned the water into wine, He can heal the blind and the lame, He can even raise the dead, is it likely that He is going to allow us and Himself to be drowned in this way? Impossible! In any case He loves us, He cares for us, and He has told us that the very hairs of our head are all numbered!' That is the way in which faith reasons. It says: 'All right, I see the waves and the billows but'—it always puts up this 'but'. That is faith, it holds on to truth and reasons from what it knows to be fact. That is the way to apply faith. These men did not do that and that is why they became agitated and panic stricken. And you and I will become panic stricken and agitated if we fail to do the same. Whatever the circumstances, therefore, stand, wait for a moment. Say: 'I admit it all, but—' But what? But God! but the Lord Jesus Christ! But what? The whole of my salvation! That is what faith does. All things may seem to be against me 'to drive me to despair', I do not understand what is happening; but I know this, I know that God has so loved me that He sent His only begotten Son into this world for me, I know that while I was an enemy, God sent His only Son to die on the Cross on Calvary's Hill for me. He has done that for me while I was an enemy, a rebellious alien. I know that the Son of God 'loved me and gave Himself for me'. I know that at the cost of His life's blood I have salvation and that I am a child of God and an heir to everlasting bliss. I know that. Very well, then, I know this, that 'if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life' (Romans 5. 10). It is inevitable logic, and faith argues like that. Faith reminds itself of what the Scripture calls 'the exceeding great and precious promises'. Faith says: 'I cannot believe that He who has brought me so far is going to let me down at this point. It is impossible, it would be inconsistent with the character of God'. So faith, having refused to be controlled by circumstances, reminds itself

of what it believes and what it knows.

And then the next step is that faith applies all that to the particular situation. Again, that was something these men did not do, and that is why our Lord puts it to them in this way: 'Where is your faith?'—'You have got it, why don't you apply it, why don't you bring all you know to bear on this situation, why don't you focus it on this particular problem?' Th.t is the next step in the application of faith. Whatever your circumstances at this moment, bring all you know to be true of your relationship to God to bear upon it. Then you will know full well that He will never allow anything to happen to you that is harmful. 'All things work together for good to them that love God.' Not a hair of your head shall be harmed, He loves you with an everlasting love. I do not suggest that you will be able to understand everything that is happening. You may not have a full explanation of it; but you will know for certain that God is not unconcerned. That is impossible. The One who has done the greatest thing of all for you, must be concerned about you in everything, and though the clouds are thick and you cannot see His face, you know He is there. 'Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.' Now hold on to that. You say that you do not see His smile. I agree that these. earthborn clouds prevent my seeing Him, but He is there and He will never allow anything finally harmful to take place. Nothing can happen to you but what He allows, I do not care what it may be, some great disappointment, perhaps, or it may be an illness, it may be a tragedy of some sort, I do not know what it is, but you can be certain of this, that God permits that thing to happen to you because it is ultimately for your good. 'Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness . .

(Hebrews 12. ii).

That is the way faith works. But you and I have to exercise it. It does not come into operation automatically. You have to focus your faith on to events and say:

'All right, but I know this about God, and because that is true I am going to apply it to this situation. This, therefore, cannot be what I think it is, it must have some other explanation'. And you end by seeing that it is God's gracious purpose for you, and having applied your faith, you then hold on. You just refuse to be moved. The enemy will come and attack you, the water will seem to be pouring into the boat, but you say: 'It is all right, let the worst come to the worst'. You stand on your faith. You say to yourself: 'I believe this, I am resting on this, I am certain of this and though I do not understand what is happening to me I am holding on to this!'

That brings me to my final word, which is my third principle —the value of even the weakest or smallest faith. We have looked at the trial of faith, we have looked at the nature of faith, let me say a closing word on the value of even the weakest and smallest faith. However poor and small and however incomplete the faith of these disciples was on this occasion, they at any rate had a sufficient amount of faith to make them do the right thing in the end. They went to Him. Having been agitated and distressed and alarmed and exhausted, they went to Him. They still had some kind of feeling that He could do something about it, and so they woke Him and said: 'Master, are you not going to do something about it?' That is very poor faith you may say, very weak faith, but it is faith, thank God. And even faith 'like a grain of mustard seed' is valuable because it takes us to Him. And when you do go to Him this is what you will find. He will be disappointed with you and He will not conceal that. He will rebuke you, He will say: 'Why did you not reason it out, why did you not apply your faith, why do you appear agitated before that worldly person, why do you behave as if you were not a Christian at all, why didn't you apply your faith as you should have done? I would have been so pleased if I could have watched you standing like a man in the midst of the hurricane or storm-0 why didn't you?' He will let us know that He is disappointed in us and He will rebuke us; but, blessed be His Name, He will nevertheless still receive us. He does not drive us away. He did

not drive these disciples away, He received them and He will receive us. Yes, and He will not only receive us, He will bless us and He will give us peace. 'He rebuked the wind and the sea and there was a great calm.' He produced the condition they were so anxious to enjoy, in spite of their lack of faith. Such is the gracious Lord that you and I believe in and follow. Though He is disappointed in us often and though He rebukes us, He will never neglect us; He will receive us, He will bless us, He will give us peace, indeed He will do for us what He did for these men. With this peace He gave them a still greater conception of Himself than they had had before. They marveled, and were full of amazement at His wonderful power. He, as it were, threw that into the bargain on top of all the blessings.

If you find yourself in this position of trial and trouble and testing, take it as a wonderful opportunity of proving your faith, of showing your faith, of manifesting your faith and bringing glory to His great and Holy Name. But if you should fail to do that, if you should apparently be too weak to apply your faith, if you are being so besieged and attacked by the devil and by hell and by the world, well, then, I say, just fly to Him at once and He will receive you and will bless you, He will give you deliverance, He will give you peace. But remember always that faith is an activity, it is something that has to be applied. 'Where is your faith?' Let us make certain that it is always at the place and at the point of need and of testing.

READING 5 – The City of God

Isaiah 25:6-26:6

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. [7] And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. [8] He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. [9] It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." [10] For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trampled down in his place, as straw is trampled down in a dunghill. [11] And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim, but the Lord will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands. [12] And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.

[26:1] In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah : "We have a ***strong city****; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. [2] Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. [3] You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. [4] Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. [5] For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the* ***lofty city****. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, and casts it to*

the dust. [6] The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy."

In the previous three chapters we've looked at "What is the *Gospel*?" and now we are going to look at what is probably the second most important word in the Vision statement, and that is the word "city."

Isaiah talks incessantly about cities, and we're looking at the book of Isaiah, so let's see what Isaiah teaches us about what God thinks, what the Bible thinks, and therefore, I hope, what we should think about cities. And we're going to look at it under three headings – as Isaiah tells us about the (1) importance of cities, (2) the two cities, and (3) the final city.

The Importance of Cities

This first point is drawn more from reading between the lines of Isaiah. Notice that verse 1 of chapter 26 says, "*In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah : 'We have a strong city'*." Isaiah talks about urban realities incessantly, so much so that people have sometimes called this "the book of the city." He talks about cities sixty times, and it is always so positive—we are singing, "*We have a city. We are living in a city*."

When you read not only Isaiah, but really when you read the whole Bible, you can tell…you may not if you just read one verse here or there… but if you put all of what the Bible says about the city end-to-end and read through it, it's very, very clear that the Bible has a much more *positive* understanding of cities than we do. The assumption behind so much of what the Bible says about cities is that ***anyone in their right mind would want to live in a city***. Look at, for example, Psalm 107… great place…Psalm 107 starts off by saying, *oh, these poor people…they*

don't live in a city; and then they cry out to the Lord…and God in His mercy hears their cry and He lets them live in a city…He takes them to a city. And, when the children of Israel go into the Promised Land…when they go into Canaan …you can read about this in Numbers 35….God orders them, as they're starting to settle, He orders them to build six cities. In other words, He orders a certain degree of urbanization; He orders density, He orders walls, gates, and town squares.

Now, when most of us, especially modern Americans, hear this positive perspective on the city, we really don't understand it. What's the big deal about having a strong city—about living in a city? Why is it so important?

Basically, the answer that is assumed (some places it is stated directly…but it's usually assumed) is simply this. Look at the history of the human race. Cities have always provided a greater number and diversity of human connections. In the cities there are more people ***like* you** than anywhere else, and there are more people ***unlike* you** than anywhere else. There is a greater diversity of human connections and contacts and networks and alliances possible. And, because of that, because there are so many more people **like** you (as good as you in the city, as well somewhere else), and so many more people **unlike** you (utterly different from you in the city, as well somewhere else), it creates creativity and innovation; it gets you to think in new ways. Throughout the history of the human race, out of cities have come new ideas, new practices, innovations, and trends. And therefore… cities set the course of the culture. As the cities go, so goes the society.

That's the reason why Isaiah and the reason why the Prophets are so hard on cities; that's why they are so hard on Jerusalem . They know that if the rich trample the poor in Jerusalem , they are going to trample the

poor everywhere. If people worship idols in Jerusalem , then the rest of the nation will be idol worshiping. If the cities decline spiritually, morally, socially, and culturally…then the whole society goes that way…for as the city goes, so goes the society.

That was also the assumption amongst the very first Christian missionaries. You can read about it in the book of Acts. Let me propose this in a very, very stark way: the early Christian ministers and evangelists…if you read in the book of Acts, and it went on after the book of Acts…we know, from history….the early Christian ministers, and missionaries, and evangelists…when they wanted to spread the Gospel, they went almost exclusively to cities, and they almost ignored everywhere else. In Acts 16, when Paul wanted to reach Macedonia , what did he do? He chose the biggest city in Macedonia , Philippi …went there, planted churches, and then left.

Why? Because if you have a culture like they did in Rome (and it is not a whole lot different than New York City)…if you have a culture in which the dominant theme is *self-glorification and power*, and you want to turn it toward the way of *service and forgiveness and sacrifice and love and peace*, then the only possible way you could affect your society was to go into the cities and live that life out there. It's the only possible way.

So the early Christian missionaries ignored everywhere else and went to the cities, and by the year 300 A.D., historians tell us that the urban populations of the Roman Empire were about fifty percent Christian, whereas the rest of the countryside was pagan…in fact, our word *pagan* comes from the Greek word for "farmer" or "man of the country." But, you see, if the cities are going in one direction and the countryside is all another direction, it doesn't matter…the society is going the way of the city, and that's what happened.

Therefore, what the Bible shows us is that cities are absolutely crucial: as the cities go, so goes the society.

A Tale of Two Cities

The **second** thing we learn in the book of Isaiah is that the history of the world is a tale of two cities. These two cities are described here, especially in 26:1-6. There is the "**strong city**" and the "**lofty city**," and they are two different things. We have a strong city (vv. 1-4), and then God humbles the lofty city (vv. 5-6).

What is the "lofty city"? The lofty city is a human social order based on pride (verse 5), not humility; and based on self-salvation, (verse 1), not God-salvation.

The first example of a human social order, a city, based on self-salvation was the tower of Babel, which by the way was a skyscraper, being built, in Genesis 11, and all the people came to that city and built that skyscraper, we're told in Gen. 11:4, to "***make a name for ourselves***." Now, from the book of Genesis all the way to contemporary postmodern theory, everyone has always said that the power to name things, the power to define things, is the ultimate power there is. When people say, "I am going to make a name for myself," what they are really saying is "I am going to be my own savior and lord."

A city based on self-salvation is a city based on the idea that you can create your self—self-creation, self-definition, and self-justification through performance and accomplishment, which, by the way, is the central cultural narrative of New York City . Self-definition! Self-creation! …through performance and accomplishment! Now, if you have a social order based on that…based on self-salvation not God-salvation, you have

a social order of what? *Exhaustion and oppression.*

First of all, it is ***exhausting***. Notice the contrast. The lofty city, unlike the strong city, does not have perfect peace. Self-creation and self-definition means you're always driven, you're always restless, you're always exhausted, you're never sure where you stand. In fact, the higher you go in the lofty city, the *more* nervous you get. Are you going to keep your position? How are you going to keep it up? People think you're really great…*you got to this place*…but, can you do it tomorrow and the next day? And what about the competition? You're always restless…you're always driven, and therefore it is a place of exhaustion.

But it is also a place of ***oppression***. It is a place where the poor are trampled…because…if you're building your own self-definition…your own identity, and therefore constantly exhausted, at the very least you are not going to notice the problems of other people; and at worst, you are going to trample on other people to get up the ladder.

So…the lofty city is a human social order…a city…built on self-salvation and power, not on God's salvation and peace; it is based on self-creation, not on service.

There is another social order, another city, described as the "**strong city**" (vv. 1-4). "*We have a strong city*." Notice that it's based on God's salvation: "*Hesets up salvation as walls and bulwarks*" (v. 1). This means, instead of a social order based on power, it's based on peace. Instead of a social order based on "your life to benefit me," it's a social order based on the idea "my life to benefit you." You don't need to create yourself…you already know who you are. That's the reason why verse 3 says, "*You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You.*"

Two things…first of all…this city—this divine city, this city of God – as opposed to the earthly city - this new human social order—is marked by the word "peace," which is the word ***shalom***. In Hebrew, the word *shalom* (which we translate "peace") is much richer than our English word "peace," which usually means the cessation of hostilities, or maybe just an inner calm. ***Shalom means full flourishing***—absolute flourishing in every area. Shalom actually means to be webbed and knit together [8]. For example, I experience physical shalom when my body is working fine, and when it starts to break down and the parts do not mesh…and the parts start to fight with each other, like in the case of cancer or something like that, I lose my physical shalom. It unravels. I disintegrate. Shalom is interdependence, interwovenness, cohesion, wholeness—physically, emotionally, and socially. This city…this *strong city*…is a city of shalom.

What I really like is that it says, "*You will keep him in "perfect peace*" (v. 3). In Hebrew the way get across magnitude is through doubling…the way get across intensity is through doubling. In Hebrew there's no word for "perfect peace." What it actually says…literally…is "You will keep him in 'peace peace.'" This isn't just shalom—this is "shalom shalom." It is a way of saying *infinite peace*…peace…peace…peace…infinite peace… because you don't have to make a name for yourself. You know who you are.

And because of that, the city of God is a place of *joy* and of *justice*. It is a place of joy because you don't have the relentless, relentless exhaustion of self-creation and definition. And it's a place of justice because there - you don't have to move ahead at the expense of other people. You have an inner peace by which you can serve others.

So…there are your two cities: the city of God and the earthly city (the

strong city and the lofty city).

Now, here's the question. How do these two cities relate to each other? What is their relationship? Where are they? If you read this superficially, it would look as though right now we live in the earthly city, a place of exhaustion and oppression…and someday God is going to end it and bring in the city of God …that's what it looks like. For example, near the end of chapter 25, Isaiah talks about God bringing…in very, very vivid terms…***God is going to bring down the lofty city; He's going to bring down the oppressive city***. He's going to trample it down. And at the end of chapter 26, verses 5 and 6, He is going to level the lofty city (vv. 5-6). He is going to bring down its oppressive social structures.

So at first, it looks like the lofty city we're in here now…but someday the city of God . But notice it says in verse 1 of chapter 26, "We ***have*** a strong city." And, there's a lot of discussion in the Bible that talks about the ***presence*** of this city. It's much more complicated than to say, "*we are now in the city of man and later, someday, we will have the city of God* ." It's much more complicated than that!

The two people that best explain the relationship of these two cities to each other are Jesus and Jeremiah. Jesus and Jeremiah…and I'm actually going to take them in that order. Centuries later, Jesus (knowing this theme from the prophets…knowing this theme that history is a tale of two cities) looks at His disciples, and in one or two verses in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, so it tends to get missed, in Matthew 5, He says, "*You are a city on a hill*," He says to His disciples. You're a city on a hill. "*You are the light of the world…. Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:14 -16).

Now, when Jesus said that, He wasn't just pulling a metaphor out of the air. He had all of the Old Testament background. Here's what He's saying…He's saying to His disciples—He's saying to anyone who knows Jesus and whose life has been changed through radical grace, anyone who has begun to experience the peace…peace…peace…the perfect peace…the deep peace…of not needing to make a name for yourself, not having anything to prove at all. What He's really saying, "on the basis of that, **I want you to form *alt.city.org***. You are the alternate city of God …in every human city."

You are *an alternate city*. **You're *not* an alternate city** if you just simply come to a church service and get something out of it as an individual; it gives you some inspiration and then you go home. <u>You are *not* an alternate city unless you are creating an alternate human society</u>.

And what Jesus is calling us to…what Jesus is saying, "*This social order needs to begin to be realized now amongst the members of the **people who have been changed by My grace***." And therefore, inside the community of Jesus, work should not be the exhausting thing it is when it is self-creation, but the *joyful* thing it is when it is service. Inside the community of Jesus, people who outside can't get along (people of different races, classes, and vocations), inside they can. In the community of Jesus, we use sex, we use money, we use power on different bases. We are the alternate city…we are alt.city.org…we are the alternate city ***now***. *We are the strong city **in** the lofty city*. That's what Jesus says we've got to be.

Now, if you want an historic example of that, you have to go back even further…because what Jesus was giving His disciples – and therefore us - was not a new idea…even though He always gives it to us in the best form…it certainly was not a brand new idea, because if you go back to the

book of Jeremiah, we see the very thing that Jesus is talking about (already… before the coming of Christ). Now, if someone raises this question…(because of our vision statement [9] inside the bulletin every week)…if somebody says to you, "where is that in the Bible?" well, it's actually all through the Bible, [10] but almost word for word, certainly idea for idea, the whole vision statement can be found in Jeremiah 29:4-7.

Let me give you the background. The children of Israel had lived for centuries in a culture in which faith in the Biblical God was the official religion. Then the Babylonian Empire…on the part of the Babylonian army came and sacked Jerusalem and killed all sorts of people and took the professional classes into exile to Babylon .

The professionals! Why the professionals? They took the leaders…to make them live in Babylon, assuming they would assimilate and lose their distinct cultural identity in a generation or two - and that way they would have subjugated the nation. So, when the Jewish exiles, who were all professionals, came to the outskirts of Babylon, they knew the agenda of the Babylonians…the agenda was: "*we want you to move into the center of the city, we want you to build houses, we you to settle down, we want you to get involved in the economic life…get involved in the cultural life* (*of the city*)"…they knew what the purpose was. It was cultural annihilation.

So the people started to congregate on the Chebar canal [11] outside of Babylon . They figured they had but <u>two choices</u>: *we can move into the city and be part of the heart of the city and its cultural and economic and social life, and lose our distinctive identity*; **OR** *we can stay out here and be separate and be withdrawn, and keep our identity*.

But then, God wrote them a letter through Jeremiah, and it was a total shock:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel , says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon : "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

And the word 'welfare' there is shalom. *Pray to the Lord for it, for if it (the city) prospers, then you will prosper*. There are two things God told them to do, and they are absolutely crucial for us to understand:

The first thing He said was ***move all the way in***. Get involved in the life of the city - totally.

Secondly He said ***stay distinct…be different***… keep your beliefs, keep your practices, even though they will be offensive to many of the people in that pagan city.

Now here's the question: how could they have been expected to do *both* of those things? It certainly seems like it is *one or the other*.

Now, **here's the crucial thing**. God in essence is saying … '*I want you to be different. I want you to keep your practices—your Biblical practices, your Biblical beliefs—but I want you to go into the heart of the city, and go in there* ***not*** *to feather your own nest,* ***not*** *simply to have yourselves a wonderful life, but to seek the peace and shalom of the city*…and the word shalom means full-flourishing. *I want you—out of*

your Biblical faith…and out of your Biblical practices…and out of your distinctive faith in God …I want you to go into the heart of this horrible, imperialistic, violent pagan city--that has already killed a lot of your relatives and family members--and I want you to make it a safe place, an economically prosperous and vital place, a socially just place. I want you to work for the full shalom of the whole city.'

In other words, the secret is…here's how you can be involved in the city and yet keep your identity: *go in there as servants*. If you go in there simply to increase your tribe, if you go in there simply to increase your wallet or if you go in there simply to increase your own personal prominence, you will fail. You will simply…in a couple of generations… you will lose all of your distinctiveness. You will become as violent as them. You'll just be part of the lofty city… you'll be building your life on the same things they are. On the other hand, if you go in…in you go in there to *serve* out of your difference, to *serve* out of your beliefs…TO SERVE…you can benefit the whole city.

Let me get practical. Why are you here? Why did you come to New York City ? You're professionals. Why are you here? I can tell you why you are here. Virtually everybody that comes here, comes here *premised on a cost-benefit analysis* for you personally. You're here so you can say, "I've got a job in New York " and it helps your resume; you are here to make money; you are here to make it in your career; you are here to enjoy the cultural opportunities; you are here *to incorporate into your self-image the coolness of having lived in New York City* . You're here to meet cool, connected people. In other words, you are here to *plunder* the city.

And it will convert you. I don't care whether you are a Christian or not —you are going to be assimilated by this power-hungry, fairly cruel,

rapacious city. It's going to get you -- if you just come here to build a great life; in fact, it will get you EVEN if you just come here to build a great church.

But, if instead, if you come here to pour out your life and use the resources of our faith and church to build a great city, then we will increase. That is to say, we will keep our identity, and we will find *more and more that people out there want to know what we believe*. The only way to really keep your identity and at the same time prosper the church, the believers, is by not trying so much to prosper the church, but by trying to prosper the whole city. That is what Jesus said, and that is what God says…what God says through Jeremiah.

Proverbs 11:10 …there is no way to have your vision renewed – unless I quote this verse which has been so important in the life of Redeemer since the beginning: "**When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices**." There are <u>three key words</u> in that verse. **First** of all, "**Prosper**"—there is a group of people who are prospering. "Prosper" does mean to "get successful"— come on up, make money, become prominent, move on up in the ranks. This group is moving up the ranks. But—get this—the whole city, when it sees that, rejoices.

The word "**Rejoice**" is a word that <u>always means</u> the "celebration of a military victory." It is very odd that it is used in this place. What it's really saying is that there's a group of people, who when the whole city sees them becoming prominent, the whole city feels like it's a victory for the whole city.

Who is this group of people? They are called the "**Righteous**," and that really gets across in English, doesn't it? No! These are the people who believe in the true God, but as they get prominent, as they make

money, as they get position, as they get influence, they so plow themselves and their resources into the whole city, so love the whole city, and serve the whole city, that the whole city is looking at them saying, "*I don't believe what they believe, necessarily, but I can't imagine this city without them. They help so many people. They are so crucial to this city's life. They press so much value into the city that if they left we would have to raise taxes enormously*.[xix]"

That's the kind of people God calls us to be…who believe in Jesus. If you come here simply to build a great life, or even to build a great church, and not to build a great city, it will convert you; it will take you over. ***The citizens of the city of God are the very best citizens of every earthly city***, and that is how they stay, very distinctively citizens of the city of God . Now, there you have the importance of the city…and you have these two cities, with history as the tale of these two cities…and there you have the call to be the alternate city… ***alt.city.org***…in God's alt.city.org. ***We're to be the alternate city…in every city***. Of course the question is, how do we do that? How in the world do you get the power to do such a thing?

I know in most cases…and I am talking to people who believe, people who don't believe, and people who don't know what they believe…I'm talking to all of you…I'm talking to every single one of you. If you were to actually start to live your life on the basis of this social order, on the basis of this calling, it would change you…even if you have come to New York City as staunch-believing Christians, you came to New York (or your city) basically to benefit yourself and not the city. And, according to this, that is deadly—deadly to you and deadly to the city. So how are we going to change our hearts? How are we going to get the power to do this?

The Final City

The answer is ***the beauty of the final city***. Where is the final city? Look at verses 6-8. Right away you're likely to say, "I you don't see anything about a city." But wait. It says, "*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples…*" And you say, "*Now wait a minute… now we're outside…we're in the Adirondacks …we're not in New York City anymore. You know, there's mountains and there's cities That isn't a city*. **Yes it is.** You know this very, very famous verse…you probably do - Psalm 48 says, "*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King*." (Psalm 48:1-2)

You see, Jerusalem …which was the image for the future city of God … so often in the prophets…had at its center, on the highest place in the city, Mount Zion , the temple. It was a way of symbolizing that the city was built around God and His salvation. And therefore, in the prophets and in the Old Testament…you need to watch out for this…they are able to say, "*how beautiful the city of God is, how beautiful the mountain of God is*," because they were the *same* thing. To talk about the mountain was to talk about the city.

And so what we have here, in Isaiah 25: 6-8, is an amazing vision of the future city of God that He is going to bring about on this earth:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

"For all peoples"—it's a multiethnic city. We are finally going to get the healing of the nations. *A feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of*

rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined…you really have to watch the movie *Babette's Feast* some time [xx]. That's the picture of our future. This is absolute physical well-being…this is the end of deformity… this is the end of hunger…this is the end of poverty…the end of disease; … it's the end of death.

*And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering (*literally, "shroud"*) that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the* ***Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces***.

Now, you've likely heard that verse a lot…I've heard it a lot as well, but I suddenly realized something as I was meditating on this. God could have said, '*I am going to end suffering*,' and that would have been true… and that's what He's saying… but it's also an abstraction. When He says, "*I am going to wipe the tears off of your cheeks*," who does that? Mothers do that, especially…to kids. Now…here's God saying, '*I am going to become so intimate with you, my love is going to so envelop you, there will be no desire of your heart, no matter how deep, that will be unfulfilled; and there will be no hope in your heart, no matter how lofty, that will go disappointed*.'

So…here we have emotional and psychological (absolute fulfillment) shalom; we have physical shalom; we have social justice and the healing of the nations. This is the future city. How will God bring that about? How does he bring that about?

And the answer is right in the middle: "*On this mountain He will destroy the shroud that enfolds all people. He will swallow up death forever*" (vv.7-8). That's how God is going to bring about that future city, and that is what gives us the power and the pattern for how we can begin

working to bring the city of God into our earthly city.

He destroys the shroud and swallows up death. Now…that's interesting. The "shroud" was exactly what it sounds like…it was grave clothes…the thing you put around a dead body. And this is very vivid… this is saying that all peoples everywhere are living under a shroud of death. It is *eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die*…and therefore the cities are places of oppression and exhaustion. But God has destroyed the shroud. **He had destroyed the shroud**. He has swallowed up death.

How did he do it? The answer tells us how we can live life in the city. He did it by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ moved into our human nature. He didn't commute from the suburbs; He moved downtown…and He moved into our human nature. He came under the shroud *voluntarily*. And He is the only person who ever died voluntarily for someone else.

Now I know, you say, "*What? What? What?"* He's the only person who ever died voluntarily…out of love…out of the freedom of His will…out of the goodness of His heart, DIED. You want to respond*, 'No…no…no I know of other stories, very moving stories of people who died*.' True… but, other people may have chosen the timing of their death…other people may have chosen the manner of their death, and that is very noble, (and I don't want to diminish that) but they had to die anyway. **There's nobody who's ever chosen death except Jesus Christ.** We have to die; we all have to die; *we are under the shroud*. But He went under the shroud voluntarily. He moved into our neighborhood; He moved into our human nature. And when He came in, instead of taking power, He gave it up; instead of taking control, He sacrificed and loved us and served us. And by paying the penalty (because that's what death is…punishment), by

fulfilling the curse, by paying the penalty, He broke the bands of death. He destroyed its power over us [12].

So we read, on the one hand, John 19:40, "*Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.*" He went under the shroud. But then, it says in chapter 20, "*Simon Peter, who was behind [John], arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, went inside. He saw and believed*" (vv. 6-8). When they got in there, the grave clothes of Jesus (the shroud) were laying there…crumpled…and they were laying there still wound up the way they had been when they were put on Jesus. He had just passed right through them. He had destroyed death.

What an image! He swallowed up death, and those who believe in Him know that eventually we are going to have the material world…we're going to have Babette's Feast…forever. This is our future.

Now, if you know that pattern, then and only then can you see where you get the pattern and the example and the power to do what God called people to do in Jeremiah. We are supposed to come into New York City and not try to take over the city, but simply live the life of Jesus—which is the way of the Cross, which is "***my life for you***," …which is the way of service. Then people will start to say (and only when we start living like that…and we're not living like that…because nobody's coming ask us that yet) – but when we do, then they will come and ask, "What do you believe that makes you live like this?" And when we get that kind of influence, it's the only kind of influence that's safe to have. It's the only non-coercive influence. It is the only way we are really bringing in the city of God ; otherwise, all other kinds of influence only helps us…we are just new

people in power in the lofty city.

But that is how Jesus did it—He came to earth, eschewed power, eschewed control, and died for us, and, as a result, **He is the most influential person in the history of the world**, by anybody's standards. And that's the only way we can go. To the degree you see Him moving into our neighborhood, you might say…our city, and dying for us, then you can do the same thing.

Where it says, "swallow up death forever," let me quote two theologians who talk about this. One theologian says:

My skeptical secular friends care so much about justice for the poor, they care for alleviating hunger and disease, they care for the environment, and yet they believe the material world was caused by accident, that all beliefs in right and wrong are socially constructed and totally relative, and that eventually the world and everything in it will burn up in the death of the sun. And then they find it discouraging that so few people care about justice, without realizing that their own worldview completely undermines any motivation to work to make the world a place of peace and justice. I wonder why my liberal, secular friends wouldn't at least want the resurrection of Jesus Christ to be true. What a great resource and incentive, the only great resource and incentive, to work for peace and justice in the world and never give up.

And N. T. Wright says it this way:

The message of the Resurrection is that this present world matters; that the problems and pains of this present world matter … [that] all the injustices, and all the pains of the present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice and love have won the day….

If Easter faith is simply about believing that Jesus is raised only in some "spiritual" sense … then it's only about me, and finding a new dimension for my own personal spiritual life…. But if Jesus Christ is risen from the dead physically, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world, news which warms our hearts *precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts….*

Easter means that in a world, where injustice, violence, and degradation are endemic, Easter means that God is not to prepared to tolerate such things indefinitely—and that we will work and plan with all the energy of God to implement victory of Jesus over them all.

Take away Easter, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring problems of the material world. Take it away, and Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is wish-fulfillment. Take it away, and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity was for wimps. [But it is not.] [xxi]

What kind of people, by the way, should we be when you realize…we believe that **the endpoint to which all history is going is this incredible party in a big city**? Richard John Neuhaus says ***if you don't like New York City , you are going to hate the New Jerusalem***. What kind of people would we be—should we be—if we know we are on our way to a party? How festive should we be… if we knew we were on our way to physical wholeness; how much should we be working against poverty and hunger; and most of all, how much we should be trying to convert people, to give them the deep peace—the peace peace—on which this city is built.

READING 6 – Living In Community

Isaiah 56:1-8

1 This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for My salvation is close at hand and My righteousness will soon be revealed. 2 Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil." 3 Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from His people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." 4 For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, who choose what pleases Me and hold fast to My covenant-- 5 to them I will give within My temple and its walls a memorial and ***a name better than sons and daughters****; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. 6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve Him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship Him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to My covenant-- 7 these I will bring to My holy mountain and give them joy in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." 8 The Sovereign LORD declares-- He who gathers the exiles of Israel : "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."*

… we're here *to build a great city, for all people, through a movement of the Gospel, that brings about personal conversion,* ***community formation****, social justice and cultural renewal in New York City , and through New York …the world.*

Why is it so important to form a community? Why is community formation so important? This passage…Isaiah 56…will tell us about…

The importance of community

The patterns of life inside that community

The power to create that community

The Importance of Community

Now, look at **verse 1** – the importance of this. *This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for My salvation is close at hand…***Now***,* in chapters 54 and 55, all the stress has been on **God's unconditional salvation**. You can't merit it. **It's free**. We'll see, in Isaiah 55…in the next Reading, Isaiah talks about the fact that God's salvation is WITHOUT COST to us…it's free…we can't merit it!!

This verse though…look …"*live justly…do what is right…for God's salvation is close at hand.*" That sure sounds like that immortal poem, "*better watch out, better not cry, better not pout, I'm telling you why…'you know who's coming to town…he's gonna find out whether you're naughty or nice…hmmm, hmmm, hmmm* [xxii]…so it sure looks like it's saying, "**you'd better live the good life…IF you want to be saved**…and that seems to contradict everything else in the Bible. So, maybe there's a better way to read it…and there is!!

Because salvation…the word salvation…here is important. We have to look at what the Bible says about salvation, and especially about the fact that ***salvation has a history***. There's a history to it. Go back to the beginning of the Bible and we're told that God made the human race for three purposes: (**1**) first of all, to build our lives, to center our lives, to

serve God, (**2**) secondly, to live in loving community with one another, (**3**) and thirdly, to care for this created world. But, as we've pointed out many times…the Bible tells us that the human race opted to not build its life around God, but rather opted to keep control of their lives and not to serve ourselves.

W**hen our relationship with God unraveled, all other relationships unraveled**. So relationships between nations now are characterized by strife of various kinds…often war and violence; and relationships between classes and races are characterized by strife and conflict, and often by violence; **BUT EVEN** the basic relationships…even relationships that are not across cultural divides…even family relationships…even friendships…they're always blowing up!!….unless you work incredibly hard…they're always blowing up!! What's going on?

The answer is, you can only have a ***solar system*** with one center. If every planet wants to be the center, you have a solar collision…not a solar system. In a world in which everyone is self-absorbed and everyone is thinking about "me and my own needs…"**everyone is self-centered**. **Human community, which we desperately want, is a lost dream**. And I mean EVERYONE…sure, there are people who let other people walk on them…exploit them…and push them around (YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE)…but, think about why you do that. Isn't it fear? Isn't it cowardice? Isn't it in some cases, a need to be needed. It's self-absorption!! It's ruining human community.

But… God was not content to leave us in our ruins. He came down to Abraham and He said, "*I want to make your family into a new, reconstituted human community. **I want to create a new humanity…a new community…of peace and justice and of love**…and I'm going to do it out of your family*." In order to do that, He

had to intervene in time and space…and He had to bring a baby out of a ninety-year-old woman, Sarah. A couple of centuries later…Moses… Mount Sinai…and God comes down again and says, '*I want to make you not just simply a family, but a whole nation, a whole society…to create a reconstituted human community…a new humanity of peace, and of justice, and of love.*' But…in order to do that, He had to intervene in time and space. He had to come down in a much greater way…because He had to liberate the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and bring them into Canaan .

And now, Isaiah (chapters 40…all the way through 52)…as we've been seeing…points forward to another intervention. He says: '*a greater Moses is coming who's going to bring about a greater liberation. Jesus, the Christ, who on the Cross is* ***not simply going to be liberating us from political and social oppression…as bad as that is…but from sin and death itself***.' And that's the greatest intervention we know, in which God Himself comes down in the form of a human being… in the form of Jesus Christ…and He dies and He rises.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples, "*You are a city on a hill.*" You are the reconstituted human community. **<u>You</u>** are the new community of peace, love and justice that God is creating in the world. But now, it's not just a family…in fact it's not just one nation or ethnic group…it's now **all the peoples are to be incorporated into *His*** new community. Not just in one land, but all lands…**you're the alternate city…the alt.city.org…*IN EVERY CITY***. However, the history of salvation is not done. Because when you get to the end of Isaiah…chapter 65…God says, "*behold, I'll create a new heavens and new earth…the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more…the wolf and the lamb will feed together…the lion will eat WITH the ox…*

they will neither harm nor destroy…on all My holy mountain," says the LORD. All relationships are healed. THE FUTURE: absolute human community… absolute harmony…even between us and the created world. Every relationship instead of being frayed and broken is brought back together again. That's the salvation which is to come. And notice…see the history…God comes down…into time and space…in stages…each time more radically…with His saving intervention. And every time He comes down, it's more radically, and therefore, the recipients of His grace are more transformed…and the community they're part of is also reconstituted in a more extensive way…a more radical way.

So, what is verse 1 really saying? It says, "**maintain justice and righteousness**," and that's about relationships…see? Justice and righteousness has to do with relationships. This whole passage is about being a people…a community. That's why it says, "*let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'the Lord will exclude me from His people*.'" This is a community living in the light of the future, ultimate salvation, that final new heavens and new earth. **We are to be a community, that is a foretaste, a sign, a mini-version of that perfect human community of peace, and of love, and of justice** that God is going to finally going to reconstitute totally and fully…the whole earth…at the end of time.

Now we begin to understand what all these rules are about. This is not a set of rules…"you live like this and God will save you." Think about it… think about the book of Exodus, for example. When does God give the Law? **Does He give the Law to the people of Israel in Egypt and because they obey He saves them**? **No!!** He saves them and then gives them the Law. **Why?** Well, obviously you are not saved by obeying the law but are saved by grace. **What then is the purpose of the**

Law? The Law's purpose is to turn you into that community, to make you a sign and a foretaste of that community. See…God says to Abraham, "I'm going to make you into a community…walk before Me. God says to the people through Moses, '*I'm going to make you into this community, here's the Law. Jesus Christ said, because of My Cross, My death, My resurrection…I have made you the new, multi-ethnic people of God…the new human community…and now, here's the Sermon on the Mount…* and what are the rules about? They're not so much ways for you as individuals to live…they are mainly for the community of people …how **the community of people…who have been transformed by grace…should be living together**. They're blueprints…they're ways for us to be…this sign of the future kingdom of God . That's what we're being told here.

Now, what are the practical implication of this? Let me tell you…let me put it to you as bluntly as I possibly can!! <u>The purpose of God's salvation is to create this new human community</u>. Well, you say, '*I thought the purpose of salvation was to pardon my sins and forgive me*.' That's a means to an end!! Of course…it's incredible. But it's a means to an end. What do you have at the very end of the history? You have a city coming down…out of heaven. In other words, God wants a new society… He wants a new human community. So, here's what this means: **When God summons you into His salvation…when God summons you into His forgiveness…when God summons you into a relationship with Him**…He simultaneously summons you to be cemented deeply into a new human community. The community of those in your locale, who've also been changed by GRACE. This means, you can't just come to church…even every week…and just get information and inspiration…for apart from that…you will not cement yourself into the community…that's not enough. You're frustrating the very purposes of

God's saving power, AND you can't expect His renovating power to work in your life…LIKE THAT. Yeah, He'll forgive you your sins…but the purpose of God's salvation…is to change us by putting us into a community.

Do not fall for the Western myth that you are *mainly the product of your personal individual choices…and therefore, by your personal individual decisions and agenda you can change yourself*!! You are mainly the product of how you've been treated…you're mainly the product of your family….you're mainly (and you'll know this the older you get)…you're much more controlled by who you hang out with and who you've been around…and who your models are. And you'll never be changed into the likeness of God…you'll never be renovated…**you'll never be transformed by the power…the saving power of God, unless you're willing to put yourself IN the community that His salvation has been moving toward**. You've gotta do that!! Doesn't matter if you're in New York for only a year…or two years…you've gotta put yourself into community. It isn't just showing up for church…and listening to a sermon and then going home. That's not being in community…that just means 'being in a crowd.' Not the same thing!!

The Patterns for Human Community

We've seen the importance of community in verse 1. Now…let's look at the patterns of human community. In other words, ***this community*** is not just an aggregation of people giving one another emotional support… it's an alternate community…an alternate society. And there's at least three patterns we see here in Isaiah, for how life inside the community needs to be different from life outside in the rest of the world. And what we have here are patterns for (**1**) work and money; (**2**) family and sex, and (**3**) patterns for race and power. Yes…all here!!

Work and money – First of all, Isaiah is talking about how money and work are to be used…or conducted…inside this new community**.** In verse **2,** "*Blessed is the man who does this*"…*blessed is the man who does justice and righteousness…**who keeps the Sabbath***,"…without desecrating it. Now, you see, a lot of us say, it says, 'blessed are the people who live with justice…blessed are the people who do this AND keep the Sabbath.' Why is that a synonym? Why are those the same? Because, **when you and I think of the Sabbath we think of "time off."** That's nice, but is there more to it than that? Oh, yeah!! Oh, yeah, yeah… there has to be…much more to it. In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, God says this, and I'm paraphrasing here: '*On that day (*the Sabbath day*)…no one in your house may do any kind of work…that includes you, your family, your male and female servants, your livestock and any foreigners living among you. All your servants must rest as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt , and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath.*'

In other words, God has liberated you from slavery; therefore, you are to observe the Sabbath. Huh? <u>God is saying here</u>, ***the Sabbath is a reenactment of liberation from slavery***. Now why would that be? Well, because there's one thing we know for sure about the Sabbath…the Sabbath is a deliberate limitation on how much work you do, how much money you make, how much profit you take, how much production comes from you…it's a deliberate limitation on work, on money, and on income and production. ***How is that liberation from slavery***? …Oh, my!! Well, first of all, for you, **<u>if</u>** you don't know how to practice the Sabbath, which is to say, **<u>if</u>** you don't know how to regularly walk away from work and money…for the sake of your body… for the sake of your

family…for the sake of relationships…for the sake of your soul, **you're a slave**. You're a slave of someone's system…you're exploited…**Yes you are**!!! You may not believe it. You may even be doing it voluntarily, but you are still a slave. You're being exploited by the particular consumption and production system of some culture. Because the culture comes at you and in essence says…*if you want to be a successful person…if you want to think of yourself as successful you have to have so many things…and you have to live in this kind of place…and you have to be able to go to these sorts of places!!* In other words, the culture is a mill, and you are the grist. And if you do not practice Sabbath, ***it's grinding you***. You're exploited.

But not only that, it didn't just say, *that this is a celebration of liberation from slavery for you*…it's saying *all your servants must rest as you do.* The Sabbath mindset means you must also not exploit those around you…you mustn't let other exploit you…keeping the Sabbath takes care of that from happening…but then you must turn around…(and I know many of you will say, '*but I don't have any male or female servants*')…Well, OK…but this is more complicated than that. What this means is you don't squeeze your employees…you don't squeeze your customers, and for example, ***you look to see if*** the companies you're making money through **are** squeezing their employees…**are** squeezing their customers…**are** harming the neighborhoods and communities in which they work. You may well say, '*well, I guess I haven't even looked into that sort of think… actually, I don't want to look into that sort of thing*.' It's because you're living like the world, AND NOT, a member of the new community. Do you see? Economic relationships…work relationships… inside the community mean this: that when **it's a choice** between making a profit and your body…or your family…or your soul…if it's a choice between work and money…and the needs of your customers…or

your employees…or the broader community…**you make less**. **<u>Simple</u>**!! And because of that…because of that constant choosing, you don't have the physical, you don't have the social, you don't have the family, you don't have the social breakdowns that happen out in the rest of the world. You're whole…you're living holistically. There is a "wholeness" about the new community. (There'll be much more on social justice Reading 7.)

Secondly, there are patterns here about how you regard **sex and family** that are pretty interesting**. The eunuch! "***To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath, to them I will give my temple and a name better than sons and daughters. Let not the eunuch complain, 'I'm only a dry tree***."** Now, let's talk about the reasons in ancient times for castration. (Bet you didn't think you'd be studying that today, did you?). Why, in Israel , was castration forbidden? The reason it was forbidden was because God wanted on the one hand to say, '*think…sexuality, physicality, child bearing and family is a good thing*.' Because, in the cultures around Israel , there were many places…many cultures…that practiced castration, because some people just thought that the body and sex and physicality were defiling and polluting. Another reason…probably even more common reason for castration was that kings did not want high officials working in close quarters with the royal family, unless they were castrated…they didn't trust them. And so the way to gain position and power was castration. In other words, you chose career over family. So, you see, <u>God is saying</u> to Israel , '*You can't do that!! You mustn't make an idol of individual status over family*. ***You mustn't choose career over family***.'

However, Isaiah also says, '*that does not mean that a eunuch who has bound himself to the Lord should be excluded from the people of God…*' because, as God says directly to the eunuchs, who have bound themselves

to the people of God: "***I will give you a name better than sons and daughters.***" This is just as radical…this is not just a critique of the kind of cultures we have today…which actually choose the individual over family…and choose career over family…this is a critique, a radical critique of ancient cultures **and** of traditional cultures today…Because, as you know, traditional cultures today and ancient cultures back then made an idol out of the family. And said **to women**, '*you're nothing if you're not married with children'*…: they basically said **to men**, '*you're nothing if you don't have heirs…if you don't have a family*. ***You're NOTHING!!***'

And **God**, in that milieu, in that culture…has the audacity to say '**I will give you a significance apart from family. I will give you a name better than sons and daughters**.' Dr. Stanley Hauerwas has written about how radically different this attitude is than that of any other religion EVER. He says:

"*One of the clear differences between Christianity and all the other traditional religions was that singleness was legitimated.* ***[13]*** *You'd don't realize how incredibly radical that was. It was legitimated in Christianity not because sex was in any way questionable Rather, it was a clear expression that* ***one's future*** *is* ***not guaranteed by the family but by the kingdom of God .*** *In traditional religion and culture, the family bore one's deepest hopes…it was the way to establish your name…the way to realize your economic and social aspirations. But Christians do not place their hope in their children. Rather, their children, if they have them, are a sign of their hope that* ***God…has not abandoned…and is saving the world***. ***[xxiii]***"

Boy…the balance…the criticism…the critique of both individualistic and traditional culture when it comes to family and sex is remarkable. The new community is different. So it's different in money…and work…

it's different with regard to sex and family…and thirdly, it's different with regard to race and power

Race and power

Notice, it says in verse 3, "*let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'the Lord will surely exclude me from His people*.'" Isaiah is looking forward to the next stage in the history of salvation. As we just said, **salvation had a history**. God intervenes more deeply in time and space and creates new communities…**each time He comes down**. At first…the new human community…the reconstituted human community that He intended to engineer…was only a family. Abraham's family. Then it was only an ethnic group…a nation state, Israel . But now, Isaiah's looking forward to this…and Jesus, of course, establishes this new human community. Now the people of God have to bring down those racial barriers…because all people are to be part of this new human community.

What I love about the book of Acts is that it's almost a commentary on Isaiah chapters 54, 55, and 56. In Acts chapter 1, Jesus, before He goes to heaven…before He ascends…He gets everybody together…His disciples… and He says, '*I'm sending you to Jerusalem , Samaria , and the uttermost parts of the earth*.' **How clear could He be**? '*I don't want you to simply go back to Jerusalem …and keep God's community one people group anymore. I'm sending you out…I want you to go in all the cities…and all the lands amongst all the peoples*.' And of course, what we have…He tells them that in Acts chapter 1…**but they NEVER GO**!! Now, this is the apostles…this is the *good* church…you know, the Holy Spirit is with them…and they STILL WON'T GO!! **They weren't much better than we are**.

But in Acts 8 God actually has to "come down" and persecute them…

create a persecution…to literally drive them out. And when they go out, **the first case of a person who embraces Christ** is both a eunuch and a foreigner…the Ethiopian eunuch…the African…the African official in Acts 8. But, almost my favorite passage to illustrate Isaiah chapters 54-56 is Acts chapter 16. When Paul is planting the church in Philippi …he first goes to Lydia …the first convert (of Paul) and she's the businesswoman…professional. The second is the slave girl…the demon oppressed slave girl, who is being economically and spiritually oppressed, and he leads her to Christ. And then he brings to faith the tough guy…the Roman…the Philippian jailor. And you know, there was a prayer…it goes way back…centuries old…that Jewish men often prayed. Do you know what that prayer is? These men would get up in the morning and they'd say, "*O Lord, I thank thee that I'm not a woman, a slave, or a Gentile*;" yet, **these three were the first converts that God** called through Paul's ministry.

You see, this is God saying to us…through Isaiah… '*this new community must be committed to power sharing and to relationship building between groups of people, and classes of people, and races that out in the world cannot do it*.' Now…two brief words by application. First of all…and I've never done this before…exactly! Can I say something to you White people? Some years ago, an African American Christian friend of mine said, "*You know one of the things that bothers me about you White Christians is that you do not know you've got a culture.*" Took me about 10 minutes to figure out…have him help me understand what he'd said…which proves his point, by the way. What he said was,

"*You White people…you say, 'oh, there's a Black culture…and there's an Asian culture…and there's a Latino culture…' but the way you do things is 'just the way things are done.' You see, you don't think of it as a*

culture…but it's a culture. It's not just the way all sensitive people think. It's not the way all Christian people think. And because White people have been in charge for so long…non-White people know how culture works. They know how their culture works…they know how White culture works. That way we know how to get around."

But we, White Christians, don't know…we tend to just think, '*this is just the way things are.*' But… if we're going to be a part of this new human community, then we will have to listen…more than we ever have… to other races and cultures.

The Power to Create Community

Now…where do we get the power to do something like that…where do we get the power to have this kind of attitude…toward power…this kind of attitude toward money…this kind of attitude toward family and sex…this kind of attitude toward community. We're Western people…we don't want community…we want to keep our options open. We don't want to be accountable. We don't want people to know our business. We don't want group decision making. *We want to make our decisions unilaterally*. Where are we going to get the power to do this? Because you see, on the other hand…in reality…we really do want community…in spite of this fear of it. Which basically, I would have to contend that results from our sin nature…and our Western culture has definitely aggravated. We need it! What do you think solitary confinement is? It's a punishment. It can drive people insane. We know that babies that are not picked up and touched and loved…they're just laid in cribs…in institutions…they die. ***We're dying for lack of community***. We're afraid of it. So where are we going to get the power to get it?

What actually engenders this desire for community…for the

foreigners…the eunuchs…to everyone…He says,“ *I will give you an everlasting name that will not be cut off*,” an everlasting name that will not be cut off!! Let’s just meditate on that…because that’s where the power comes from.

No. 1: What does it mean to have a “name”? You notice it also says*, “I will give them a memorial name.”* And the background…it’s kind of a sad background…in 2 Samuel 18:18, Absalom was near the end of his life… Absalom had a very tragic life…and he also had no children…and the Scripture says*, “Absalom set up a pillar as a monument to himself for he thought, ‘I have no son to carry on the memory of my name.’”* **Now, what he was struggling with was meaninglessness**. Insignificance. We all want to count. The idea that ‘*no one will miss us…that we’ve made no difference…to anyone at all…that we’re just a statistic…we don’t have a name. There’s no significance…we don’t count*.’ Now, in ancient times… the ancient cultures felt that if you didn’t have children to carry on your name…you didn’t count. That was meaninglessness. That was namelessness. It meant you were just a wave on the sand. It meant you really weren’t a person. But, on the other hand, **are we in better shape today***?* Andrew Delbanco puts it like this (he’s a teacher at Columbia):

“*In order to live, we have to imagine some purpose to life that transcends our own tiny allotment of days, if we are to escape the lurking suspicion that all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death. I will use the word ‘culture’ to mean the stories and symbols by which we try to hold back the melancholy suspicion that we live in a world without meaning*.”

Why does Delbanco say that there’s this kind of overwhelming sense we have in the modern world that our lives are meaningless? That we are insignificant? That we make no difference? Well, listen, go to Columbia…

go to any of the institutions…of any sort…anywhere in Western culture, and say, "***what's life all about***?" They'll all say,

'Well, we're here by accident…we came from nothing…and we go to nothing. In fact, eventually the sun is going to burn up…and everything is going to go away…and therefore, whether you live a violent, cruel life…or an incredibly loving, sacrificial life…in the end, will make absolutely no difference. No difference!! And everything will be forgotten. You are just a wave upon the sand. You are utterly insignificant, and if you believe that this world is all there is, (as Delbanco points out) *you're going to desperately spend all of your time… watching movies…and telling stories…and involving yourself in symbols…to hold back what you know to be true…and that is,* ***YOU DON'T HAVE A NAME!!*** *You're not going to last…you're insignificant…you're just protoplasm…you're just a statistic…and there won't be anybody to remember the statistic.*'

But, what if this world is not all there is? What's available? Here's what's available…(Isaiah 43:1): "*But now, this is what the LORD says— He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel : 'Fear not, I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.' I will give them an everlasting name****!"*** **If God loves you, because He lasts forever, so will you.** There's this amazing place…amazing to me…and it's in kind of an obscure spot…in Matthew 22, where Jesus is arguing with the Sadducees about the afterlife…because the Sadducees didn't believe in an afterlife. And Jesus says, '*Haven't you read this place (*and He quotes this place where it says*:) "<u>God **is** the God of Abraham… and Isaac…and Jacob</u>." God is never the God of the dead…He's only the God of the living*'…says Jesus.

Do you know what He's saying? When you love someone, you *never ever*

ever want that relationship to go to *past tense*. You never want to say, '*this was my friend*,' and you never want to say '*this was my son…this was my daughter…this was my spouse*'…you never ever, ever want to put the relationship in past tense. We're not all-powerful. And our love relationships do, unfortunately sometimes go into the past tense. But God is omnipotent - and that means, if God puts His love on you, His relationship with you can never ever ever go into the *past tense*. Never. **If He puts His love on you…you have an everlasting name.** You are eternally significant. **You count forever!!** Do you believe that? You ask, '*how could I know something like that*? *That would be an amazing thing…**that would be AMAZING**…how could I know something like that*?'

Well, the answer is, here's how you can know…the second part of verse 2. "*I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.*" What does the term 'cut off' mean? That is not an accidental term. Because the word "*to be cut off*," was the curse of the covenant. The curse of sin…and it's used over and over again in the Bible. You know, why? To be cut off from your people…to be cut off from God…was the curse of sin. It's very simple. Sin is selfishness; sin is self-centeredness. Self-centeredness isolates you…self-centeredness takes you away…and I just said, '*solitary confinement is torture*.' Solitary confinement makes us go insane. We need…**we NEED** human community, and yet sin cuts us off from human community. We can't bear that…we can't bear the curse…we can't bear the natural punishment that comes from our self-centeredness…and we don't have to because we're told, 'Jesus Christ came and He bore it'…as we're told in Isaiah 53:8 (we read it before): "*By oppression and judgment He was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of My people He was stricken.*" And He wasn't just cut into…He wasn't just

cut by the spikes…He wasn't just cut by the thorns…and He wasn't just cut by the spear…**He was cut off, because He says, "My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken me**?"

And the thought, that changed my life many years ago…I don't even remember who gave me this illustration originally…but basically, they put it this way…and let me give it to you: '*If after this service, if one of you says, 'I hate you, I never want to see you again, that will really hurt me for a while…**but** after this service my wife says, 'I hate you, I never want to see you again, that would be infinitely worse.*' Because, you see, the deeper and the longer the relationship…the more the agony of a lost relationship…which is the greatest agony…to be cut off…that we can know. But for the Father and the Son, who've know each other from all eternity…for the Son to voluntarily lose the infinite Heart of the Universe…the love at the Heart of the Universe…to lose love infinitely…was the greatest agony. You can get rid of your images of hellfire and sulfur and stuff like that…it's nothing compared to this. But He lost the love of the Father…**He went into the ultimate infinite, solitary confinement, so we could be brought in**.

He became nameless so that we could have a name. Do you believe that? If you believe that, it's a truth, but not a truth that leads to exclusivity. People around New York are always saying, '*Now…if you think you have the truth, that is exclusive. If you think your view of reality is right and everyone else is wrong, that's exclusive.*' But of course, that is a very White, Western Enlightenment understanding of reality that you think…you know…the idea that there is no objective truth…and that what really matters is individual rights. In other words, for you to say, to someone else, '*if you think your view of reality is right and everyone else is wrong*'… it is a view of reality…that you think is

right and everyone else is wrong. In other words, **you cannot avoid truth claims**. The real issue is ***which truth claims*** lead you to embrace people who are different than you…and ***which truth claims*** lead you to scorn people who oppose you. ***Which truth claims*** lead to community? ***Which truth claims*** both humble and affirm you so that you are not afraid of people who are different than you? *Nor can you despise them. This is* ***the answer****:*

If I build my name…if I build my identity on being liberal, then I'm going to have to despise those who are conservatives. If I build my identity on being moral and having traditional values, then I'm going to have to despise liberals. If I build my identity on being a hardworking person, I'm going to have to despise people who I think are lazy. You see, however, if I build my identity on what Jesus Christ did for me and the fact that I have an everlasting name by grace, I cannot on the one hand feel superior to anybody, nor do I have to fear anybody else…I don't have to compare to them at all. In other words, my identity is based on someone who was excluded for me, who was cast out for me…who loved His enemies. And that is going to turn me into someone who embraces all others…that's the basis for the new human community that this world so desperately needs.

Take it yourself…take hold of it.

READING 7 – Witness

Isaiah 55: 1-7; 57:14-21

1 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. 2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. 3 Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. 4 See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. 5 Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor." 6 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

14 And it will be said: "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people." 15 For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. 16 I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me-- the breath of man that I have created. 17 I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. 18 I have seen

his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, 19 creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel . Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. "And I will heal them." 20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 21 "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

Each week we're reminded "why we're here…" "(we're here) *to build a great city, for all people, through a movement of the Gospel, that brings about* ***personal conversion****, community formation, social justice and cultural renewal in New York City, and through New York the world.*

So, let's look at the phrase "personal conversion"…and boy, a lot of people get the willies when they hear that. Let me just come out and say it…it's not rhetoric…: **we *convert* people**. Now, a lot of folks say, '*you shouldn't be in New York if you're trying to convert people…because that's intolerant…IT'S INTOLERANT…that's proselytizing. Believe what you wanna' believe, but don't try to convert other people to it. Don't insist that your way of believing is better than somebody else's.*'

This past week (*October 2005*) in the *New York Times there was a fairly innocuous* article about campus ministers…the title of the article was "Peer Ministers Lead Search for God in College Dormitories. [xxiv]" In the article, there was this quote: "*Being a minister here isn't about tallying up baptisms or proselytizing the incoming freshmen*….said Padraic Bartlett at the University of Chicago. "*We don't bellow Cotton Mather style about the perils of damnation.*" More commonly, Mr. Bartlett said, "*ministers lend an open ear to those who are discovering themselves spiritually*." They're **discovering themselves spiritually**. Now, a lot of folks in New York City would say, '*that's ok…that's all right!! See how simple it is. Don't try to convert people…don't*

proselytize…just help people discover themselves spiritually.'

Well, it's not that simple. Can I just show you how complicated it is? If you've ever read Robert Bellah's book…a very important and influential book by a sociologist at UC Berkeley…a look at American culture…it was written 20 years ago now…but if you've read that book [xxv] you'll know this: IF YOU THINK that that's the best way to do it, just let people discover themselves spiritually…if that's what you believe…**you've been converted**. "*You've been converted to the* ***worldview*** *called expressive individualism. Not only have you been converted to it, you're trying to convert everybody else to it, or you wouldn't have said, 'that's fine… that's how you should do it, too*.'"

In other words, to be converted by a non-innate comprehensive view of reality and to seek to convert others to it is unavoidable**.** And, it's at the heart of what the Bible calls us as believers to do as well…to bring a particular message…that is, a comprehensive view of reality…that converts people. So, there's really nothing particularly wrong about it if you really understand something about your own view. If people in New York really understood themselves a little better, they wouldn't want to make it seem so awful for Christians to go about converting people. And that's what I'd like to show you a little bit. It's not as simple as people make it. '*You want to convert people but I'm open-minded*.' IT'S NOT AS SIMPLE AS THAT!! Let's see what this text tells us, about mission. According to the Bible, (**1**) God calls His people into **mission**, (**2**) He gives them a **message for that mission**, and (**3**) God gives the **motivation and the power for that mission**.

The Mission (Isaiah 55:3-5)

By "mission"…I'm looking at the center of this first portion of text,

Isaiah 55:3-5…where in verse 3 it says, "*Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live, I will make an everlasting covenant with you.*" We'll get back to that, but **that's remarkable**. God is saying, '*I will revive your 'insides' that your soul may live and I will call you into an eternal covenant, a special covenant relationship with Me.* ' And then He says, "*I promised this to David and I made him a witness to this. And now I want you to summon nations also to this*." That's what vs. 3,4, and 5 are saying. He says, '*there's this new relationship…this new covenant relationship with God that I promised to David…and I made David a witness to the nations, but I want you to be a witness to the nations too. I want you to summons them to this. This thing that I promised to David*.'

The word '***witness'*** is our English word translating a Hebrew word that means essentially the same thing…it's a legal word. The word 'witness' can mean either, '*to give evidence and testimony in court*' **or** it can be '*to act as a kind a notary'*…to say '*I witnessed vows being made… and authorized it in that way*.' Either way, the idea of a witness in this Isaiah passage is God essentially saying…*'I am calling people to live in a certain way…or act in a certain way…because of a truth that I have experienced myself…a truth that I have seen myself*.' As well, God is saying to His people, '***I want all of you to bear witness to the life-changing, world-changing relationship with Me that changes you. I want you to bear witness to others about it, and call them and summons them to it as well.***'

Now, this, by the way, is not just picked up in the book of Isaiah…it runs all the way through the Bible. So, for example…let me say something that's striking. If you've actually encountered the Biblical God, if you've ever been brought into **an intimate encounter with the Biblical**

God, you will be propelled out into the world in mission. So…when Abraham meets God personally, God says, "*I will bless you*." Then He says, 'Get out!…get out of your country. Get out of your familiar milieu and comfort zone…GET OUT!!'

Burning bush!! God calls Moses in and says, '*I want to have an encounter with you*,' and almost immediately He says, '*Go to Pharaoh*.' Isaiah 6…we're going to look at that passage later in this series…God takes a coal from the altar…forgives Isaiah's sins…He gives Isaiah a new experience of intimacy with God…and then He says, '*Go*!' God never calls you radically in without sending you radically out. Jesus says to His disciples, "***As the Father sent me, so I send you***." The Latin word for "sent" is ***missio*** - mission. Jesus says, '*as God made me a Man in mission, I make you men and women in mission*.'

Anybody who's actually encountered ***the real Biblical God***…not just believes ***in a cognitive vague way…but has*** been brought into an intimate encounter with the real God is always propelled out. Out what?!! OUT!!…with a new fullness in your heart to live sacrificially with other people…out with this message…out…doing justice in the world. I don't want to give you the impression that the only part of Christian mission is the message…calling people to believe. We also see that part of the mission is to Justice in God's Name. And, we'll get to that as well.

Nevertheless, here, you have to understand that if you do not sense that you're propelled out…almost under an inner compulsion…to bear witness to the life changing, world changing relationship with God…you haven't gotten one. **You're never called in without being SENT OUT!!** There is both a centripetal and centrifugal dynamic to a relationship with God. And, wow…isn't that different from the culture tells us life is about. One of my favorite German words is from the

existentialist Heidegger…who believed what most of the elites in our Western culture tell us, and that's "*biological life is an accident…your life is an accident…so, we're here just by accident.*" Heidegger said that means that modern life is characterized by ***Geworfenheit***…isn't that a great word? You don't know German but doesn't that word ***sound*** great? What it means is "**thrownness**." To be thrown! We sense that we have just been '*thrown out there*' into the world. So that…we're being propelled…**but seemingly at random**. But that's not what the Bible says really. That's not the characteristic of human life…not if you know Jesus. The Bible says that **life is characterized by a *sentness…not thrownness***. You're propelled all right…but it's strategic…it's purposeful…you sense a usefulness you've never ever had before…EVER.! So, **all human beings** who have encountered the living God are men and women in mission.

Now we have a problem…just a little one, which will require going back to the beginning of this Reading . A lot of folks will say: '*That's my problem with Christianity. I have a problem with Christianity. You say you believe in Christ. Fine, but why do you have to make others believe in Christ? Believe what you believe…but don't say your belief is more right than somebody else's belief. Don't try to convert people. See, that's my problem with Christianity.*' But, I'd like to show you…with all due respect…that **there's a problem with your problem**. There's a very very big problem with your problem!! One person who puts it perfectly well, even though it was kind of a "throwaway line" …N. T. Wright, in his book on the resurrection…he's a world class historian and scholar…he says this…again, it's a great line, even though he almost says it in passing. He says:

Jesus' resurrection is often seen as an immoral doctrine, because it

appears to legitimate Christianity over against all other religions. The doctrine of the resurrection appears, therefore, to be a triumphalistic doctrine…How very undemocratic of god, or God, people think (without realizing that that idea itself is a local, almost tribal, Western-Enlightenment view.)

Now see, he's absolutely right in what he's saying. The idea…or Christianity's view of things…*is a faith*…it's a view of spiritual reality…it's a view of things. It's a view of reality based on faith. But, the **modern view** that says <u>all religions</u> are ***subjectively valuable but no one is objectively more true than any other***…that was the idea of Emmanuel Kant, and many of the thinkers in the 18th Century. They also believe that it (their view) is also something you can prove. It's a view of spiritual reality…it's a view of things… based on faith. Now, you see what N.T. Wright is trying to say. If it's narrow to say one religion is the right one, then it's just as narrow to say one view of religion (that all religions are equal) is the right one. Just as narrow!! To say '*you mustn't convert people because all religions are subjectively valuable, but objectively one is not truer than another*,' is a view that you are saying is the right one. And it's "*righter*" than the Christian one. Or righter than the Muslim one…or righter than the Jewish one…or *righter* than the other ones. And so, when you say, '*you mustn't convert people to a non-innate, comprehensive view of reality*, you are trying to do the very thing you forbid.

So…listen…can people be intolerant when they are trying to convert others. Sure they can!! You can be intolerant with your attitude…you can be arrogant and haughty…you can be coercive and manipulative in your tactics. But when you say '*anyone who tries to convert someone to their worldview is intolerant*'… you're being a hypocrite. You're not only being

a hypocrite…you're a worse hypocrite because you won't admit what you're doing. So, *conversion to a comprehensive view of reality that changes your whole life and then seeking to convert other people is unavoidable.*

The Message (Isaiah 55:1-7)

Secondly, not only are we given a mission, by God, ***we're given a message***. Our mission is to take a message out. Now, if you look at **verses 1-7** you'll see it says, in verse 3, "give ear and come to Me. Hear Me…listen to Me." Now, that is not simply a request to take in information. This means "***believe me***!" There's a message…that, if we believe it, it's going to change everything…because, look…at the end…in verse 7 says, "*Forsake your way*." That's a call to conversion. Because, the way is your behavior. It also says, "forsake your thoughts"…that's even more of a conversion…that's not just changing your behavior and your practices…it's '*change the way you think*. Ultimately, your behavior and your thinking comes from a deeper root…and that's your soul. Verses 2-3 says…God through Isaiah says, '*I'm going to give your soul delight and satisfaction. I'm going to give your soul (*vs. 3*)…LIFE*!!'

Now, what is this talking about? The soul in Hebrew…the word "soul" is not so much the spirit…as opposed to the body…but it's the 'heart;' it's the very essence of your life…as opposed to the parts of your life. What we need to understand here, ***God is saying you're not converted unless you are converted from the heart***. Conversion is not simply changing your practices…not simply changing the externals…not simply changing your behavior, you have to change from the heart. And what converts you…the Biblical message is…what converts you is…God says, '*I'm going to change what your heart seeks and how the heart seeks it*.' **Conversion is not complete unless** you're converted in <u>what your</u>

heart seeks and how your heart seeks it.

God changes what the heart seeks. In English, the "heart" means the emotions…versus the thinking…right? But…in the Bible, the word 'heart' means **the control center of the whole life**. It is *the seat of the mind, the will, and the emotions*. The heart is your most fundamental beliefs, commitments, and hopes. Now, let me…oversimplify…be as simple as I possibly can. Everyone has things that make them happy… there are many things that make you happy…like chocolate…and everyone has religious beliefs…some of you don't believe, much… religiously, and you're not really sure you believe in God. Some of you believe very strongly in a particular religion…but, apart from whether you're religious or not…apart from religious or irreligious beliefs…every one of your hearts…at the most fundamental level…your heart of hearts… there is something that, if you have that, then you will be happy. There's something that you say, '*ultimately, if I have that…I can do without chocolate…but if I have that…then I'll be happy. AND, if I don't have that…I CAN NEVER BE HAPPY*!!'

Every one of us has a belief about something like that…and has made a commitment to something like that…and…you know…that is what controls everything else. That is the "control center." That's why the heart is the control center of the mind, will, and emotions. Why is it that one person gets really upset about something and another person doesn't. She's more emotional? He's more emotional? NO!! Different… fundamental heart commitments as to what they think they have to have to be happy. Why is one person able to change behavior, and another can't? Or, one person is able to do "this" and another one can't. It all has to do with the HEART!! **Unless the heart is changed, you're not converted**. Because…notice verse 1 & 2…what this metaphor is about…

every heart is after '*bread and water*.' Now, what's '*bread and water*?' Milk is great and wine is good…but especially the "bread and water." Every heart…every soul…is after a certain kind of bread and water…it's after something…that will make it happy…it's feeding on something…it's seeking something…it's laboring for something, and God says, '***unless it's Me, you're gonna starve***.' In some cases you're eating relatively 'good food' that basically isn't going to nourish you enough and you're gonna starve. In other cases, you're actually gobbling "poison." '*Unless it's Me, you're gonna starve. You're gonna die*.' And, everybody at a fundamental level…until they get converted by the Holy Spirit…are seeking something else out …regardless of what faith you were raised in.

So…let me give you an example by what I mean when I say, 'yo*u have to be converted in the heart*.' Many years ago, when I was in college, I was part of a Christian fellowship, and there was a young man who joined up. And it really kind of shocked us all…and made us pretty happy. This young man was very very famous on the campus for being incredibly sexually active, and he had the looks to go with it…and he had the presentation…he was handsome…he was charismatic in so many ways. And then, to our surprise he came into the fellowship where he declared that '*he's a Christian now…and he foreswears his sexual past…he foreswears all that…and he going to live a chaste, pure life*.' And he threw himself into the Christian activities…and in Bible studies…and all the activities we did, and everyone said, '*Wow! This is a real change*.' However, it wasn't long before we came to realize that the young man, in every group…in any committee…in any Bible study…whether he was the leader or not, he had to be the leader. He always sought control. There was power struggle after power struggle…and after a while…and I do mean, after a while…it became clear that when he was sexually active…it really wasn't about sex…it was about power. He would go after some girl

until she fell for him…literally and figuratively, and then as soon as he knew that literally 'he had conquered her,' he lost all interest. It wasn't about sex…it was about power.

And then when he came into the Christian church…when he came into the Christian activities, suddenly he adopted all the Christian beliefs…and he adopted the Statements of Faith…and he adopted Christian practices… suddenly he was sexually doing the Christian thing…and monetarily he was living in a Christian way…but what his soul was after, the "bread and water" of his soul was power. Power in relationships. Deep down inside… every one of our hearts is saying, '*if I have money…if I have approval…if I have power…if I have comfort…if I have control…if I have a claim…if I have love….if I have romance'*…every one of our hearts is saying, '*that's the bread…that's the water*, and for him his justification…his salvation, as it were…was power. And, instead of switching to God, he was just actually serving "his god" of power through religious and Christian ways. He hadn't been converted. He sure looked like it. He wasn't sleeping around…he wasn't doing anything wrong…he wasn't breaking any of the rules…except everywhere he went, there was relational devastation. He hadn't changed. He hadn't been converted. Have you been converted…or do you just get active in Christian things? Did you just start cleaning up your life? I'm sure his conscience didn't bother him as much. So, ***first of all…Biblical conversion…is…you have to be converted in what your heart seeks***.

God Must Change What Your Heart Seeks

Now, **secondly**, you have to be converted in how your heart seeks "it." The other thing we see about this "call" is so interesting…its' the contrast…notice in verses 1, 2, and 3…there's not just a contrast between what the heart seeks but how the heart seeks it. "*"Come, all you who are*

thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. 2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and ***your labor*** *on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare."* Notice…it's not just that God is saying, '*Come feed…your soul and your heart…and rest in Me…*' He's also contrasting the ways in which hearts are converted…He's saying, '***GRACE…defines Me…not labor***.' See the difference. In other words, every religion on the face of the earth, and the default mode of every human heart…whether you're after blessing or nirvana…or salvation…or whatever you want to call what your heart seeks…whatever you think will make you happy…you must work for it…you're laboring for "it…" and you're being driven into the ground by it.

Remember how the old song goes…"*you're nobody 'til somebody loves you*. [xxvi]" And if you really really believe that…you're nobody until somebody of the opposite sex loves you…then you're being driven…by the need to look in a certain way…and you're asking yourself, "Why?" If you really think it basically has to do with power or approval or money. You may be coming through what looks externally like conversion…trying to get it this way…or that way…BUT you're LABORING. You're laboring!! You're working like crazy, but think about this: if you seek God…even get involved in Christianity…and you say, '*I am going to pray…and I'm going to give…and I am going to do good things…and I am going to live according to the Bible…and I'm going to surrender*'…if you seek God like that…then you're not really seeking God. **You're still ultimately being your own savior and lord**. Therefore, God says, '*Unless, you not only begin to seek Me, but you seek Me through the way of grace…unless you start to find your deepest fulfillment in Me versus "things", and unless you seek to find Me through My grace…rather than through your moral*

performance…you're not converted.' And that's the message. Pretty radical. Pretty amazing!!

Now, that leaves us with questions, and that's just as well…to answer them before we address the third point. (**1**) What will convert the soul then? Is it enough to just say '*seek God instead of things…and you need to see that it's free*?' Is that all? There's a lot of people who say, '*OK… hmmmm, it doesn't seem to be working*.' What will do that…and then, (**2**) what will propel us (because an awful lot of us say, '*you know, I think I know God, but I don't feel particularly propelled out into the world with a message*?' The answer to the question, 'wh*at will propel us out into the world with a message*?'…is…besides the mission and the message…God must give us a motivation and power for it.

The Motivation and Power

Take a look at verse 3, it says, "*Give ear and come to Me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make* ***an everlasting covenant with you****, My faithful love promised to David.*." When Isaiah talks…he assumes his readers know the Bible…and we don't know the Bible as well, I guess, as his readers did, for sometimes things he says don't immediately evoke what they're supposed to evoke. When he talks about "*the everlasting covenant…that He promised to David…"* first, it's tapping into one of the main themes of the Bible…and that is the idea of a **covenant**. A covenant is a binding. solid, intimate relationship with God…**the God of the Universe**. A relationship with God. Throughout the Bible, God makes covenants with Adam…and with Abraham…and with Moses…and with David…and He makes covenants with Israel…and it looks like covenants are "possible"…*a relationship with God is possible.*

But, that word…everlasting…really pushes on a kind of sore point,

because…if you really read the Bible well, you'll see that one of the big questions that comes up in your reading…is that sometimes God seems to be saying '*YES, you can get into a covenant with ME…but it's a* ***conditional*** *one*.' There are many places where it says, '*you must do this…and then you will live…but if you don't…*' But, there are other places it seems as though God is saying that the covenant is ***unconditional***. ***These other places He says things like*** *'I will never leave you or forsake you…Never*.' And, as you read through the Bible, it's a big question…in fact there are some places where within a "chapter" it looks like He's saying, '*I will never leave you or forsake you…Never…never ever…I will always be faithful to you…*(and in the same chapter) *<u>and because you're doing</u> this…I'm dropping you*.'

Over the years, most people, actually whether they know it or not… sometimes deliberately… but mostly unconsciously…most of us resolve that tension…in one or the other of two ways. Most of us fall into either… what I call…(**1**) traditional/moral people or more liberal/secular people say, '*when it comes down to it…yeah, God is loving…but at the end of the day, His <u>commands trump His promises</u>. Yeah, God promises a lot…but unless you do what He commands…He's dropping you*. So, basically, when it comes right down to it…'*if you want a relationship with God… you'd better live up*.' (**2**) The *other people* look at the other things that the Bible says about unconditional love, and they say, '*ok, of course God is just…and of course God wants you to live a good life…but at the end of the day…His <u>promises trump His commands</u>. At the end of the day, though He tells you to live in a certain way…in the end He's going to accept you anyway*.'

And you know what happens? If you try to resolve those tensions… those conflicts in the Bible…is it conditional, or is it unconditional?…well,

it's basically conditional…or, well, it's basically unconditional…if you try to do that, you will find, you're not being converted. You're not being changed…**you're not being amazed**…you're not being propelled… you're not being melted. It's unconditional…*'oh, yeah, He accepts us…but try your best*.' It's conditional…*'you better be good…so if you get in, it's because you worked pretty hard*.'

An old friend of mine, who's now passed into God's presence…Ray Dillard, an Old Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary… told me this, years ago, and it really stayed with me. He said, '*you know, when you read the Old Testament, the Bible deliberately does not resolve that tension. In fact, you realize, it's that tension that propels the narrative*.' I said, '*thank you Mr. Literary Scholar…what do you mean*?' And, he said, '*that's the tension. That's the suspense. When you're reading the Bible the question that keeps coming up is…"is God going to finally give up on His people—but then what about His love? Or, is God going to just give in…and let His people be the idiots they are? But then, what about His holiness? Will He give up on His people? Will He give in to His people? What will it be*?" He said, '*the Bible and Old Testament never ever resolves this tension*.' I said, 'you mean it's just a paradox?' He said, 'well, no not really…'

Where does it get resolved? The last thing **Buddha** said, when he died, <u>according to his scriptures</u> was: 'Strive without ceasing'…in other words…*'keep working…KEEP LABORING*.' Labor…labor…labor!! Strive without ceasing. **But the last words Jesus Christ** said on the Cross were: "**It is finished**"…**Tetelestai.** And that word, "tetelestai"… is the word He uses…the Greek word…and it means…*'I've accomplished it*.' On the cross, Jesus Christ <u>fulfilled the ***conditions***</u> so that we could have the **love of the Father unconditionally**. So…the real question is, 'is your

relationship to God conditional or unconditional?' **The answer is *yes***. Because…we have to "buy this without cost." Do you notice that the paradox is even maintained in the imagery here? He says, "COME, **BUY**…WITHOUT COST!!"

And you say, '***now wait…a…minute!!!!…what do you mean, "buy without cost."***' Because it's incredibly expensive, ***expensive to Jesus***, but it's absolutely free to you. And if you know that…if you see Him up there…on the Cross, saying, "IT IS FINISHED…" saying '*I have traversed every inch of the distance…the infinite distance between you and God…I've traversed it…there's nothing left for you to do but to admit…to admit… that you need what I have done*.' See…that's what will convert the heart…to admit that you're that sinful…that you're ***that lost***…and realize AND admit that you can be that loved. Our pride doesn't want to admit that we're that loved…and our pride doesn't want to admit that it's the only way we're going to get loved freely…that we can't earn it ourselves. But, if you're willing to admit that…you see what it says…in that great verse…Isaiah 57:15, the second part says: '*I am the high and lofty One who dwells in the high and holy place…I dwell in the heavens…and also with anybody…anybody…who's humbled*.' Anybody who finally says…listen…you know what the Gospel really says: ***all you need is need***. All you need is nothing. All you need is to admit you've got nothing…that you can't earn it. But you realize that when you say, 'all you need is need,' most people don't have that. THINK ABOUT IT!!

All you need is nothing…and most people don't have "it." And, if you realize that…if you see Jesus Christ fulfilling the "conditions"…so that we could receive it unconditionally…***to see the Law by Love fulfilled… and hear His pardoning voice, transfers a slave into a child and duty into choice***.[xxvii] It's knowing that it was expensive but yet

free…knowing that it was conditional, yet unconditional. That therefore, ***I am more wicked than I ever dared believed, and I'm more loved than I ever dared hope***. That will make you people in mission…that will make you people with a message…and it won't offend anybody. You know why? Because if you realize that you are a sinner saved by grace, on the one hand, and you're so flawed that God had to die for you…how could you feel superior to anybody you talk to about this… about Christianity. How dare you feel superior to them? You're not a Christian because you have better doctrine. You're not a Christian because you lead a better life. You not a Christian because you're "a better anything." So…how in the world could you ever look down on people? But, on the other hand, how could you be scared of what they think? You've been so humbled by the Gospel that you can't be superior to people you talk to…but you've been so affirmed by the Gospel that you're not *really* afraid. And…that will make you men and women in mission.

You know, there's a place in Ephesians 2 where God says, '*you are God's workmanship…you've been created for certain good deeds…that God wants you to walk in*..' There are hands out there that only you can hold. There are people out there…there are hearts breaking that only you can heal. Your gender…your race…your ethnicity…your sorrows, your experiences, your age, your everything…makes you like a fingerprint… and there are certain people out there that God wants to touch… THROUGH YOU. And they're not going to be touched without you. SO GO… be a witness to the nations of this everlasting covenant…now that your soul lives.

READING 8 – Justice

Isaiah 58: 1-14

1 "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 3 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. 4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself ? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. 12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will

raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. 13 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,14 then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Each week we're taking a look at another aspect of Redeemer's Vision, which is mainly to say…what is Redeemer here for…we're **NOT HERE** to just hold services…so individuals can come and get inspirational '*goodies…*' we are here, to BE A PEOPLE to get something done in the City… "we're here - *to build a great city, for all people, through a Gospel movement that brings personal conversion, community formation,* ***social justice*** *and cultural renewal in New York City , and through New York the world. SOCIAL JUSTICE!!*

This passage is obviously about justice…and says some things about justice that are so startling, that we ought to just GET TO IT!! This passage tells us about:

* the **importance** of justice

* the **meaning** of justice…in the Bible…what it is

* and **how to become people** who do justice.

The importance…the meaning…and how to become people who do justice…in the world.

The Importance of Justice

Now, let's start by looking at this passage and what it says about justice…and it IS STARTLING!! Up in verse 2…1, 2, and 3…in verse 2 God begins to describe a particular group of people…He says: "…*day after day they seek me out*." Now, to seek God…in the Hebrew Scriptures when it talks about seeking the LORD, it's talking about worship…it's talking about going to temple…it's talking about the sacrificial system, prayer, tithes…so it's talking about people here who are very diligent in their worship observances…and, **notice it says**, "day after day they seek Me out." That means it's sustained…they don't just have a burst and then it's over.

And then it says, "*they **SEEM EAGER** to know My ways*." The word here is "to be passionate"…and because verse 1 is so negative…because verse 1 says "these people are in rebellion" (*Declare to my people their rebellion…*)…the translation to try to mute the paradox a little bit…say THEY SEEM…"eager to know My ways…AS IF they are a nation that does what is right." But, in Hebrew it actually says…in spite of the fact that verse 1 says "they are in rebellion," verse 2 says '*they seek me diligently* (they do worship), '*they are passionate to know My Laws'* (they want to know all about how they should be living…so they're looking at the Ten Commandments…and their personal morality is perfect (practically), and their fulfilling of the worship ordinances is punctilious and fastidious. **And yet**…

They come to God in verse 3 and say, "*Why have we fasted*? *Why have you not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and You have not noticed?*" And that means…and we don't know exactly how this was working itself out…what this is saying is that despite the fact that they were living lives of personal morality…they were always praying and they were always worshipping…God's not answering their prayers…and we

don't know what those prayers are…but, in a way, it doesn't matter, we can imagine…there's bad things happening to them. Bad things happening. And they say, '*we've done all these good things…we're obeying all Your rules, '**why aren't You listening to us***?'

God's response is pretty startling, because if you look down in the last part of verse 5…and 6 & 7…He says, '***Let Me tell you** what a fast is…**let Me tell you** what worship is…**let Me tell you** what it really means to seek me*.' Is it not, '*to loose the chains of injustice…to untie the cords of the yoke and set the oppressed free and break every yoke… to share your food with the hungry…to provide the poor wanderer with shelter…to see the naked and clothe him*.' "

God says something very startling right here…and to get the gist of it… we need to actually look at what Jesus says in Matthew 25, because Jesus draws very heavily on this passage…but Jesus also draws together the strains of what is said many places in the Hebrew Scriptures…in the Old Testament. For example:

* Proverbs 14:31 – **If** you insult the poor…you **insult the LORD**

* Proverbs 19:17 – **If** you give to the poor, you **give to the LORD**

In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about Judgment Day. Jesus says, on Judgment Day the LORD will have all of us standing in front of Him…and He will set on one side the people who are saved, and on the other side, the people who are lost. And this is what He's going to say to the people who are lost…this is in Matthew 25: 41…and then He will say…the LORD will say: "*Depart from me, you who are cursed…For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes*

and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "*They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you*?' (‘**When did we see You** in this condition??’) "*He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.*'

Summary: this is what God says, ‘*If you don’t love the poor, if you don’t feed the hungry, if you don’t love the naked…or the poor wanderer…the homeless…if you don’t love them, then no matter what you say, you don’t love Me. You do not have a relationship with Me. It’s a formal relationship, it’s filled with compliances and it’s filled with ordinances, but, you don’t really have a relationship with Me. not a real relationship.’ ‘The way you treat the poor tells Me the reality of how you regard Me.*’ Or, let me put it this way…and let me say this twice: **A deep social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to others, and especially to the poor, is the inevitable sign of real faith and a real connection to God**.

*A super sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to others, and especially to the poor, (*we’re being told here*) is the inevitable sign of real faith and a real connection to God…and if you think God says, You have a real connection with Me…you think you’ve connected with Me…that you’ve humbled yourself and you’ve found Me, and yet you don’t care about the poor, then you haven’t.’* This is a real index of the condition of your heart.

In other words, **Justice** is the grand symptom of real faith. It’s the great symptom of a real relationship with God. And, it will be there… maybe slowly…but it will develop…**but if it never develops in your life then you don’t have the relationship with God that you**

think you have. Quickly…do you understand that this is at the heart of Biblical faith. Some of you may have rejected the Bible and say, '*Oh, I don't believe the Bible*.' And some of you may have accepted the Bible and say, '*Oh, I believe the Bible*.' But…do you realize that this is at the heart of it (real FAITH)?? Do you know what you've rejected? Do you know what you've accepted? Do you see the importance of justice? It's AMAZING!! In Isaiah 1, God says, "*I find no pleasure in your sacrifices and offerings…stop bringing Me your meaningless offerings…I am weary of them…when you spread out your hands to prayer…I will hide my eyes from you…seek justice…encourage the oppressed…defend the cause of the fatherless…plead the case of the widow…*" In other words, if you don't have that…*'you don't have Me. You think you do, but you don't*.' Now, a question: why would God say, '*that* ***deep concern for justice for the poor goes together with a love relationship with Him***' …that it's the inevitable sign of a love relationship with Him? Why would those go together. Let's keep talking.

The Meaning of Justice

The second thing we learn here is not just the importance of justice… but, the meaning of it. When the Bible talks about justice…what is the meaning of it? When we talk about justice in our contemporary Western society we don't have quite the same definition that the Bible does. What does the Bible mean by justice? The answer is…will be seen…if we look at what is **implicitly** acknowledged in the background of this passage…and what is **explicitly** enjoined in the foreground of the passage. So, first of all I want to talk about what this passage assumes…the background…that which is acknowledged by the background.

In the background of every Bible text about justice…behind the Biblical concept of justice is the rich concept of ***shalom***. Now, just to

show you this background, look at verse 7. There's a deliberate paradox. It says, "*share your food with the hungry…provide the poor wanderer with shelter…clothe the naked.*" Now, what is a '*poor wanderer*?' It's a word that really means a stranger! Recall how Jesus drew on this passage in the warning posed in His illustrious Matthew 25 story, in which He talks about the hungry… He talks about the naked…and He talks about the stranger. Now, a poor wanderer, according to the Hebrew commentators was person who was an alien, a person from another country, who'd come into your country with virtually nothing…a person of another race…a person of another nationality…a refugee.

Now, ok…there we have it. There is a refugee. Notice the synonym at the end of this sentence…it says you need to '*share your food with the hungry…you need to provide shelter for the poor wanderer, clothe the naked, and not turn away from "**your own flesh and blood**.*'" "Flesh and blood" is a synonym for all those…of another race…of another country…of another nationality…BUT, wait a minute…what does "flesh and blood" mean? It means what it looks like it means…it's talking about blood relatives…flesh and blood is usually a term for your family. But, how can God apply that to a person…a refugee of another race? You know, in ancient times, as we often point out, ***family was everything***. You never conceived of your individual progress and happiness apart from the happiness of your family You couldn't even think like that. You would never consider primarily your own progress and status and happiness…apart from the progress and status and happiness of your family. If your family wasn't moving ahead in the world…you couldn't. It was impossible. And that was good in a way…but it another way, it led of course to tribalism…and racism…BECAUSE BLOOD WAS EVERYTHING…in the ancient world.

Now, here God's saying, '*a person of another race who is hungry and poor in your neighborhood, that person is as much your flesh and blood as if you were related to them by blood. It is your flesh and blood.*' God says, '*I hold you responsible for them. There is a solidarity between you that your idolatrous, cultural attachment to race and blood has blinded you to…but I'm not blind to it.*' What is He talking about?

The Bible talks about…and every person that understands the Hebrew scriptures, whether Christian or Jewish, or whether they're secular… understands that at the foundation of the Hebrew Bible is the concept of shalom. And…**shalom means peace, yes**…**<u>but</u>** it means something much more than that. God created the world to be a fabric, woven together …interdependent. If I were to suddenly throw down here on this table…thousands of threads…just throw them on top of each other…just unspool the threads out of the spool…just throw them down…that wouldn't be a fabric. They'd be laying on top of each other…but they wouldn't be a fabric. What makes the threads into a fabric is that each thread has thousands of interwoven interdependencies. Each thread has to go over, under, around and through every other thread. Not just laying there. They have to interpenetrate each other. They have to become interdependent. And, the more interwoven those threads are…the more beautiful…the more strong…the more warm the fabric is.

Now, the Bible says all the entities of the world…God made the world with billions of entities…but He didn't just make them to be a kind of aggregation of entities, but rather *all the entities of the world were made to be in a beautiful, harmonious, interdependent, knitted, webbed relationship to each other*. So, several examples…quickly. When your body's working properly…every part of the body is interdependently, harmoniously working with all the other parts, you experience

health…**physical shalom**! But, if you have cancer (and I notice every time I preach my hand goes to my neck because I had thyroid cancer several years ago)…if you have cancer, it means that part of your body is not working with the other parts of your body…and you experience the unraveling of physical shalom…and if it were to keep on going…there's this thing call ***DEATH…which is the total unraveling of physical shalom***.

Let's talk about the psychological. Your inner psyche has parts to it… there's the conscience…the feelings… the reason…and if they're all working together, you experience inner shalom…PEACE (psychological shalom). But, what if your "feelings" really want something that your conscience says is WRONG! You experience guilt…which means suddenly you experience the unraveling of **psychological shalom**…and there's a million ways to have psychological shalom to unravel…there's guilt…but there's also anger…there's fear…and there's meaninglessness…and there's emptiness.

Thirdly, when people have money…resources…advantages…and they plunge them into the human community…they just invest them in the community, so the parks are great…and the schools are great…and the housing is great…then you have a strong social fabric. You experience **social shalom**. But, *when those that have just ignore the people that have less*…or have not…just ignore 'them'…just hold on to everything… then the social fabric unravels. You know the movie with Jimmy Stewart…*It's a Wonderful Life,* that they show at Christmas every year [xxviii]. Don't you remember what happens when Clarence the angel shows Jimmy Stewart…who's the head of a prominent family that's just been pushing its resources into the town for years and years and years… sharing and pushing and pressing and investing. Clarence the angel says,

"*let me show you George what life in Bedford Falls would be like without you.*" And you know what it becomes…Potterville. Remember Potterville…it's Lionel Barrymore who plays the nasty, rich owner of the bank, and of course when you take George out, the rich people in that town held on to their money. And as a result, the social fabric falls apart. Potterville. (Not Harry Potterville!!) That's shalom.

The theologian Neil Plantinga puts it like this:

"The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in equity, fulfillment and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call shalom. We translate it peace, but it means a lot more than that. In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness and delight… a rich state of affairs, in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts are faithfully and fruitfully employed…all under the arc of God's love. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be. ***[xxix]****"*

Now, you realize how different this is…how different this really is from the Western idea of justice. When you and I think of justice, we almost always think of it in terms of individual rights. Justice is freeing individuals from the constrictions of the group. It's freeing individuals to do whatever they want…no matter what the group says. Biblical justice has a different trajectory. Biblical justice is different…it means interwovenness…it means interdependence…it means bringing individuals to see that "your stuff" isn't just yours. When we were going through the book of Proverbs last year, it just blew me away…to read in one commentary by Bruce Waltke…one of the great Hebrew scholars… that really knows the Hebrew…and he's thought about the usage of every word…and the entomology of every word…and for Bruce Waltke to say in one of his commentaries:

When you see the word '***righteous***'...and you see the word '***wicked'***... he says, "*let me tell you what it means. 'The* ***righteous person is*** *a person who disadvantages him or herself for the community, and* ***the wicked person is*** *a person who sees his or her resources as belonging just to them.* [xxx]'"

The righteous is a person who sees that in community...that *'much of what I have belongs to the community*.' And the wicked is a person who says, '*oh, no, no, no...it's all mine*!!' Go back through the whole Bible and put that definition in every time you see the words *righteous* and *wicked*...and **suddenly you're reading a different book**.

Now, do you see what it means to do justice? To do justice means...*'you go to the places where the fabric is breaking down, where the weaker members of societies are falling through. Where the interpenetration and interdependence of things isn't happening*.' Notice, for example...if you want a very interesting idea of what it means to ***do justice***, look at the text which says, "*Share your food with the hungry*." The Hebrew commentators point out that this literally says, '***serve, wait, on the hungry***.' This is not just saying '*give money so that somebody else can take the food*.' This says, literally, that YOU SHOULD BE SERVING THE POOR. It means getting involved. Here's what it means to do justice:

...it means you take all the threads of your life...it means you take your emotions...it means you take your time...it means you take your body (your physical presence)...it means you take "your stuff"...it means you take your money...you take it all and plunge them into the lives of other people through thousands of involvements. Involvements!! Fabric!! Threads...involvements....over, under, around, and through. ***That's how you do justice.***

And what this means, by the way…notice the case…the case of "share your food with the hungry" is an explication of the principle, "do justice." See verse 6 says, "loose the chains of injustice…deal with the oppressed…" and then says, "share your food with the hungry." And that means, if you don't share the things that you have with others, **it's not just stinginess, it's *unjust*.** It's not just stinginess…it's unjust.

Now, a lot of people in Western countries say, '*Now, wait a minute… WAIT A MINUTE!! You're telling me if I don't…if I'm not out there doing this kind of radical involvement in giving that somehow I'm just being stingy…I'm being unjust? How could that be*?' I still don't know a better **illustration**…it's still the one I would use, ordinarily as it's the shortest one…because I tend to be long-winded anyway…and that's this one.

*Think about the fact that in this city…and in all the cities in the country… and other places besides cities, I'm sure…you've got children growing up in communities in which the combination of the family and the schools, all put together…they're growing up in schools which by the time they're 14…15…16…17…they are functionally illiterate. They can't even read or write. And when you get to that age…and you can't even read or write… you're kind of ruined for the market…**you're ruined when it comes to economic and social flourishing**. You're locked into poverty for the rest of your life.*

Now…why is that happening? It's happening to hundreds of thousands of people in this city right now. Why? Well…there's the liberal political economic analysis and the conservative political economic analysis as to why this is happening. The **liberal analysis** says that it's because of unjust social structures. And the **conservative analysis** says that it's happening because of the breakdown of the family. But…

nobody says that it is the kids' fault. Nobody says that a 7 or 8-year old is supposed to say, '*I think I need to move to a better school district*.' Nobody says that the 7 or 8-year old would say, 'Father…or Mother…I think you're guilty of parental malpractice….'cause why aren't you reading to me?' Nobody says that a 7 or 8-year old kid needs to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. '*It's their fault*.' **It's not their fault**.

And yet, simple fact (and this is a long sentence…let me say it right) …**the simple fact *is*** *that a child born into my family has about a three to four hundred times greater chance for economic and social flourishing, and just happiness in general, than the kids in those neighborhoods…* is proof of *the enormously inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities in this world*…which is just one example of the way in which the fabric of this world, the shalom of this world, has been broken. Which is just one example of the injustices of this world. And…**IF I do not share** *the advantages that this unjust world has dealt me, with them, that itself is unjust*. Isn't it?

And, you know what's intriguing here…it not only talks about unloosening the yoke…but breaking the yoke. Why is injustice called a yoke? Well, a yoke is something you put on an ox…or any beast of burden. It's a burden. And for God to talk about unjust situations like… family/school situations in which kids grow up without being able to read or write…that's a situation…that's a structure, right? That's a yoke. They're being ground into the ground. They're being ground down by the structure. Notice, it doesn't just say, "loose the yoke," but "break the yoke." It doesn't simply say, '*get the kids out of the schools*,' it says, '***change those schools…change those neighborhoods***.' It is not enough just to do individual charity. You have to change the social

structures. That's what it's saying!! That's what the Bible is saying!! So, first of all we've seen the importance of justice…and secondly we've seen the "meaning of justice."

But now lastly… as we get to our last point, are you **FEELING GUILTY yet**? On a scale of zero to 10…where are you on the guilt scale? Don't…don't say! Let just say, as a pastor, I want you to know that over the years…I have used guilt a lot. I have put guilt into service…I've done it a lot!! And, I've also come to understand…being the white-haired older pastor that I am now…that it blows over…**guilt blows over**. You get used to it! First you do something out of guilt, and then you just stay guilty and you get used to it. It doesn't last. As a motivation…guilt doesn't last. And ***it will never make us, men and women who do justice in this city***. Guilt won't be enough, so stop the guilt…I'm sure you feel guilty, but I would like to end saying, '*what will make you a person who really does justice*?*'* It won't be guilt. What will it be?

How To Become People Who Do Justice

Well, we have to answer the question we started with…which we haven't answered yet, and the question is, why would Jesus say, '*if you really have a love relationship with Me, you'll care for the poor*?' Why would He say that? Now, when you look at Matthew 25…or Isaiah 1…or Isaiah 58, it's fairly easy for people to make a really BIG MISTAKE about the main point. Here is God…here is Jesus…here is Isaiah, saying, '*worship ordinance…you're doing that fine; personal morality, you're doing that fine*; *social justice, you're not doing that*.' And for you to read that and say, '***Oh, I get it****…I get it…my list wasn't long enough…if I also do charity to the poor, then God will answer my prayers. Then He'll hear me!! Then He'll give me the life that I want. Then He'll bless me. Then He'll take me to heaven*.' And if that's what you think, you have

missed the whole point of these passages.

And the whole point of this passage…the point of the passage…it's ***a critique of that type of 'religion***'. Do you know what's wrong with the people in verses 2 and 3? They are trying to put pressure on God. They are saying, '*we've lived a very good life, and* <u>*now*</u> ***YOU owe us***.' The <u>self-centeredness</u> of the human heart, which is the ***default mode of the human heart***, and which is the thing that is making this world the unjust mess that it is, is in **NO WAY AMELIORATED BY RELIGION**…like this. If you say, '***OH, ok, I got it****…I'm going to get religious…I'm going to be biblically orthodox…and I'm going to be personally moral…and I'm going to worship and pray…AND, I'm going to give my money away to the poor…and then God will bless me…and then God will take me to heaven*'…you have not only not done anything to change the fundamental self-centeredness and self-absorption of your heart…which is making the world the messy place it is…you've made it worse. Because now, you've hidden it…under the veneer of religion. THINK ABOUT IT!! If you do good to the poor…if you live a moral life…if you read the Bible and pray…you're not doing it for God's sake…you're not doing it for the poor's sake. You're not doing it for "goodness sake." You are doing it for you. You're being good out of absolute self-centeredness and self-absorption. And you know what…THAT DOES NOT HELP A THING!!

Do you realize that most…most of the way in which we try to get people to be good is like this…like verse 2 and 3. Think about how we try to get kids, for example, to be honest. We always do it out of a couple of forms of self-centeredness. We increase their self-centeredness to make them honest. The two ways we get kids to tell the truth…<u>is use</u> **fear and pride**. Now, there's a <u>secular form of fear</u>…and they do this to the kids

that go to Harvard Business School . In the ethics classes at Harvard Business School , why do they tell you to be honest? '*You need to be honest! Why? Because…then you won't go to jail…be honest or otherwise they'll get you…they'll come and take you away…there'll be a scandal… you'll be in the Wall Street Journal on the front page. You know…Enron scandal*.' So, "be good" out of fear.

Of course, there's a Christian version of that: '*be good, tell the truth, **OR, God will get you**…He will punish you*!!' And then there's another form of self-centeredness you can use to get people to be good…not fear but PRIDE. You can say, '*you don't want to be like those awful people who tell lies. You're better than that*!!' (You say to little Johnny…to little Susie) '*You're better than that…you're not one of those people…those awful people*.' So, fear and pride! Which just means ***more self-centeredness***…to get our children to be honest…to get our children to care for the poor…to get our children to be good.

So…**why is it that people do lie**? Fear and pride. So you grow up and you think, '*Oh, I'm an honest person*'…and then suddenly you get into one situation…you embezzle…you do something…and you do go away to jail, and you say, '*I don't understand what happened to me…I was not raised that way*.' YES YOU WERE!! When you use self-centeredness…when you use fear and pride to get people to be good…to get people to help the poor, you're actually **nurturing evil in the very heart of their moral life**. And at some point the jury-rigging is going to fall apart…you haven't changed the heart…you've restrained the heart…you've jury-rigged the heart, and that will never, ever, ever produce people who do justice like this. That kind of sacrifice…that kind of radical giving…that kind of plunging of your life into thousands of involvements…into the fabric…and re-weaving the fabric. No!! **Well,**

what will?

Beauty. Look at the very end of this passage…it says, "when the Sabbath day is something you do…(*that's obedience to the worship ordinance*)…when the Sabbath day you do out of delight…(*not because you have to…not as a means to an end, but an end in itself*)…and when your joy is in the Lord (verse 14) . This fall, in the Vision Campaign, I'm saying a lot of things that we've said over the years…so it's partly review… and some of you've certainly heard this illustration - but, when I was an undergraduate I had to take a music appreciation …it was a required course. In order to get an "A"…you had to be able to identify pieces of music…and for some reason, our professor really liked Mozart…so I listened to a lot of Mozart…in order to get an "A"…in order to get good grades…in order to graduate with honors… in order to get a good job…in order to make money. So, in other words, I listened to Mozart a lot to make money.

But today, if you know me, you realize I spend a lot of money to listen to Mozart. Why? Doesn't get me anything, now, does it? Why do I like to listen to Mozart? Because it's beautiful. What does it mean to be beautiful? It means it's a satisfying thing in itself. It's a delight in itself. **It is not a means to an end…it's an end**. How can we get to the place where we obey God, and love the poor, and do good for God's sake…for the poor's sake…and not for our sake? **You have to have an experience of beauty**.

Elaine Scarry actually talks about it…she's a Harvard professor that wrote a book called ***On Beauty and Being Just***. *[xxxi]*Her whole thesis is that overwhelming beauty gets you out of yourself and makes you distribute your attention to those around you. She says at one point, "*Beauty stops us, transfixes us, takes the individual away from the*

center of his or her preoccupation with self, and prompts a distribution of attention towards others." Now many people, rightly, have criticized this and said, '*you know, that doesn't work in a lot of situations*'...and I don't think it works across the board, but I can tell you one situation where it does.

When Jesus says 'if you love the poor, you love Me... if you trample on the poor, you trample on Me'...when Proverbs says, "if you lend to the poor, you lend to me"...when God says in Proverbs, "if you insult the poor, you insult Me"...**what is that saying**? It says that God identifies with the poor. **God identifies with the poor**!! "You trample on the poor...you trample on Me." He identifies with the poor. What does that mean? Well, for most of us we first think ...'oh, that's wonderful, He empathizes with the poor. He sympathizes. He has feelings for the poor... isn't that sweet.'

Only Christianity tells you how far God went to identify with the poor. When God came to the earth in the form of Jesus Christ...He was born in a feed trough. When His parents took him for circumcision... their offering was two pigeons, which was the offering accepted on behalf of those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder...which means they were the poorest of the poor. Jesus was essentially homeless...He always said, "*foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*." He rode into town on a borrowed donkey...He died and was buried in a borrowed tomb...He ate His last meal in a borrowed room...**He WAS POOR.** God became poor, but more than that, He became oppressed. It didn't just become poor...**He became a victim of injustice**.

Jim Boice, who used to teach at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, has a book [xxxii] ...and a chapter in that book with the title,

"The Illegalities of Christ's Trial," in which he traces out the fact that absolutely everything that happened to Jesus…His arrest…His interrogation…the time of night…the absence of defense counsel…hitting Him in the middle of the trial…(you know)…no public notice given… absolutely every single thing about His apprehension, His arrest, and His trial **was a miscarriage of justice**.

One of the most moving things I've ever read was a little quote in In a *Time* magazine article I read last year…talking about an African-American writer named JoAnne Terrell, who had grown up pretty bitter because of the injustice she'd experienced, as a black person in this country. But she was in a graduate course…and they were reviewing the teaching of Christianity…and they were talking about the Cross, and while she was listening to the speaker in this course, she suddenly realized something, and she said, "*I suddenly began to realize that Jesus Christ did not just suffer for us* (which she'd always been told growing up in church)…*He suffered with us*." And suddenly, an African American woman realized…**Jesus Christ had been lynched**…Jesus Christ had been lynched by a corrupt justice system. Jesus Christ knew what it meant to be under the lash.

John Stott once said: "*In a world of injustice, I could never believe in God without the Cross. I could never believe in God if I didn't believe in the Cross. Because, in a world of injustice, how could I believe in a God who was immune from it*?" And…only Christianity, of all the religions in the world, says God wasn't…was not immune from the injustices of this world. Only Christianity says, that on the last day, when you stand before the LORD, if you say, '*Lord, when did we see You naked? When did we see You thirsty? When did we see You a prisoner*?' Jesus will be able to say, '*are you kidding? They cast lots for my garment…I was naked. I*

cried out, "I thirst." I was beaten…I was flogged…I was under the lash…' Jesus Christ literally…God literally became one of the oppressed. He literally went under the yoke. **Why**? Jesus says, '*I who deserved the vindication of justice got condemnation so you, human beings, who have messed up this world and who deserve condemnation can get vindication and pardon*.'

Jesus Christ plunged Himself into our lives. He took all the threads of His glory, at infinite cost to Himself, and threaded Himself into our lives…and saved us from falling through…and that's the beauty that will get you out of yourself. THAT'S THE BEAUTY THAT WILL GET YOU out of yourself. When you see what He did for you, that gets rid of your fear (for He died for you)…so what is there to fear?…and it gets rid of your pride (He had to die for you)…so what makes you think you're anything but a sinner. **But…when the fear and the pride go away**, and all you see is the beauty of what He's done, now **you can love Him just because He's beautiful**. Because of all He's given me. I don't do anything to get anything…I just want Him. I can love the poor for the poor's sake. I can love God for God's sake. That's the beauty that will change your heart, not just restrain or jury-rig your heart. I***t's the beauty that will get you out of yourself forever.*** Isn't it ironic that the most profound experience of grace is what leads to justice? Grace leads to justice. The lack of justice…because justice fell on the heart of Jesus Christ…the grace that comes into your life…instead of justice…leads you to get out there and "to do justice, to love mercy and walk humbly with your God." [xxxiii]

READING 9 – Cultural Renewal

Isaiah 60: 4-11; 17-21

"Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. 5 Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. 6 Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. 7 All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple. 8 "Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests? 9 Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor. 10 "Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion. 11 Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations - their kings led in triumphal procession. 17 Instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and silver in place of iron. Instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and iron in place of stones. I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler. 18 No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise. 19 The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the

LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.
20 Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the
LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.
21 Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land
forever. They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the
display of my splendor.

One of the things that we say Redeemer's about, that we say in our vision statement…one of the four main things…is Cultural Renewal. And that word, 'cultural renewal'…if you are inside the Christian church, sounds unspiritual. And, if you're outside the Christian church, it can sound sinister…sounds like a takeover of some sort. Now, what we're looking at in the latter chapters of Isaiah in this series, and when you read this chapter (Isaiah 60) at first (it's a prophecy, of course)… at first you think this is predicting some future time…era…in which Jerusalem and Judah have a great deal of economic and political power and prosperity… because it talks about "the wealth of the nations" *coming to you, O Jerusalem…and the kings who used to oppress you are now serving you.* But, if you look more carefully, you begin to see that it's talking about something that not only has never happened in history…but as far as we know…in human history, now…couldn't happen…it couldn't happen in human history as we know it.

First of all, notice verses 8-10…where it says, "*who are these that fly along like clouds to their nests, surely the islands look to me…in the lead are the ships of Tarshish.*" What is this talking about? The viewpoint of this prophecy is standing…looking out on the ocean…and across the whole horizon…where the ocean meets the sky…something appears… something white appears. And at first you're looking at it and you're thinking, '*what is that*?' Clouds…maybe it's the clouds…a front coming.

But then it gets bigger and you say, '*wait a minute, maybe it's flocks and flocks of birds.*' And then you begin to think, '*it looks like all of the islands of the Mediterranean are coming'*...and then you realize it's ships...it's sails. But it's the biggest, greatest fleet in the history of the world...it's massive because (and these names don't mean much to us today unless you do a little study)...but Midian and Shebah are the lands of the south...and Ephah to the east...and Kedar and Nebaioth are to the north and the west...and Tarshish was basically Spain...it was the uttermost...farthest west land that anyone knew about, in those days. And what this is saying, is that literally, ***all the wealth of all the nations of the world is streaming into Jerusalem for the honor and glory of God***. Not to make money...not to make money...over and over again it says, '*all this is coming, all the riches are coming to proclaim the praise of the LORD...and to the honor of the LORD your God.*' This has never happened and we can't imagine it ever happening...within human history.

Then you get to the end of the passage and it REALLY goes over the top. Because, in verse 18, it talks about '*a society*' where there is no violence...or disorder of any kind...no crime...no more war. And then in verse 20..."*no more sorrow...no more sadness*" And in verse 19, it doesn't need the sun or the moon anymore. Things are so good. And now we begin to realize that we're looking at the future...we're looking at the new heavens and the new earth that God is going to create on this earth. And, in Revelation...John, in the end of the book of Revelation has a similar vision from God...of the same thing. Listen how similar...John said:

"*I saw a new heaven and a new earth* (this is Revelation 21 and 22) *I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God...and I heard a loud voice saying, 'now the dwelling of God is with*

human kind…and He will live them…He will wipe away every tear from their eyes…there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain… for the old order of things has passed away…the holy city shone with the glory of God…and its brilliance was like a precious jewel, as pure and clear as crystal…and the great street of the city was of pure gold…like transparent glass…the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light. On no day will its gates ever be shut. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it…and down the middle of the great river, stands the Tree of Life…and the leaves of the Tree are for the healing of the nations."

Now, here's the main thing we learn. **This is the future**. This is the destiny of the human race. John…Isaiah…unanimous…this is what whole Bible says. So, what is our destiny? What are we going to be spending the rest of eternity doing? Cultural activity. This society…this city…is filled with cultural activity. And, we learn four things about it…this is really important: (**1**) we learn about the **goodness of culture** – (**2**) the **brokenness of culture** – (**3**) the t**rue diversity of culture**, and – (**4**) **how culture can be redeemed**. The goodness of culture – the brokenness of culture – the true diversity of culture, and – how culture can be redeemed…ALL HERE.

The Goodness of Culture

Let's stand back and realize what's being said. What is being said, is – 'h*ere we have a picture of the future state*'…and you see it: there's commerce happening here, there's architecture happening here, there's science happening here…and there's art happening here. In the future you have all these cultural activities going on. Why? Because, our future is a material future. The book of Revelation makes it very clear that at the end of time…at the end of history, we do not see us as individuals leaving

the material world and going off into some ethereal realm…a disembodied spiritual realm. Instead **we see the power of God coming down to cleanse and perfect this material world**. So, if you want to see the future of the human race, you look at Jesus after the resurrection…when He had His absolutely perfect glorified body, but He could eat a fish. And you could put your hand through the nail prints… you could feel Him. Now, contrary to everything you ever heard…through Star Trek…the evolutionary future of the human race…we will not be balls of light…or points of consciousness…we're going to hug and be hugged… we're going to literally eat, drink, and dance in the kingdom of God. And because, it's a material future…***cultural activity is a glorious good that will go on forever***. That's the first point…cultural activity is a glorious good that will go on forever. Let's meditate on this for a minute… what do I mean by that?

If you go back to the beginning of the Bible…there you have God with His hands in the soil making us. Keep this in mind…Eastern religions have always said that *the material world is an illusion*. The material world is not really important. Western religions…the Greeks…the Romans… believed the material world was defiling and debasing…the spirit was good and the body was bad, and the dirt was worse. Here, in the beginning…and this is just unprecedented in the religions of the world…here is God with His hands in the soil, making us. And, when He makes us…He made us gardeners. Now, you know what a gardener does? A gardener cultivates…which is the same word as to culture a piece of land. To "cultivate" and to "culture" are the same thing. It's the same word. To cultivate…to do <u>cultural activity</u> is ***to take raw material and arrange it in such a way as to draw out all of the enormous potentialities of it for the flourishing of human beings and human community***. Cultural activity is taking raw material…not

leaving it…but cultivating it and drawing out…all its potentialities for the flourishing of other people…and the flourishing of the human community. For example, we need beauty…there are flowers; we need food, there's vegetation…and a gardener does cultural activity. But…we have to keep on going. Mark Noll puts it like this…here is how God made the world:

"Who formed the world of nature which provides the raw material for all the physical sciences? ***Who formed the universe of human interactions*** *which is the raw material of politics, economics, sociology and history?* ***Who is the source of all harmony, form and narrative pattern****, which is the raw material for art?* ***Who is the source of the human mind****…which is the raw material for philosophy and psychology? And who, moment by moment, maintains the connection between our minds and the world beyond our minds? God did. God does."*

That's a great list. Think about it. Cultivating…drawing out…arranging the land, so it brings forth beauty…and brings forth food which we need for the flourishing of human beings and human community. Let's keep on going. What's music? You're taking the raw material of sound and fashioning it into music. What's writing? What's theater? It's taking the raw materials of human experience and fashioning them into narratives and into stories. What are the visual arts? It's taking, for example, dye and sticking it onto canvas…and, you know what, the human race cannot live without beauty…can't live without stories…these things give our lives meaning. And, so what is that? It's the same thing as gardening. You're taking the raw material of creation and you're drawing its potentialities for the flourishing of human beings, and especially human community.

Elizabeth Elliot, my old teacher used to say, when someone washed

and combed your hair, …whenever your hair was just combed…she couldn't help but think of Genesis 1:1 – "*order out of chaos. The work of the Spirit*." When someone comes and cleans your house, you could not flourish without that…unless you do it yourself. In other words, so called menial work is part of cultural activity. You know, when God…who originally started with His hands in the soil…the God of the Bible…and when God made the first human beings gardeners…and when God did become a human being…did not come the way a Greek god would come… as a philosopher… didn't come the way a Roman god would have come if he were a general…but **He came as a carpenter**. The Biblical worldview has the highest possible view of the most menial work… because everything from gardening to combing hair to investment banking is cultural activity. And it's something that God does…because the Spirit does convert the soul…but in Genesis 1, the Spirit brings order out of chaos. ***The Spirit is concerned about creation***. The Spirit loves creation. The Spirit cultivates creation.

Now, when I said, 'all the way to investment banking,' I couldn't help but think about Richard Mouw, who's a scholar and seminary president. I listened to a talk given by him to a group of financial people. He said something very interesting:

Do you realize what creation is? God existed…and then God decided to take the breath of life, which He alone had, and put it some other beings…so that suddenly, there were other personal beings…and gave them freedom of will…knowing, that by putting something that He had into these people…allowing them…the human race…to see the light of day…and giving them free will, He knew eventually it would be incredibly costly to Him. The investment was going to be incredibly costly. Infinitely so!! But…why did He do it?? Because, in the end, will it

be worth it? Will it be worth it instead of just having God? We'll have a whole universe of angels and human beings…who knows what else…all loving an praising. Of course it's worth it.

God is the ultimate investment banker. Because…He took His resources, and He risked them, and at infinite cost…did something that actually expanded the beauty and glory of the universe. And listen, there's a lot of reasons we're going to get to…there's a lot of bad reasons for all work, but when a venture capitalist…an investment person…sees a human need…and sees a talent to meet that need, and then risks his resources, to see an enterprise that meets a human need….creates jobs and creates human flourishing…that's cultural activity. That's not just godly, that's God-like!!

When Mouw was done with his talk, several investment bankers came up to him and said '*not only did that help me but…could you please talk to my minister about that*?' And every one of them said, '*you have to understand that our ministers are always saying, "look, you business people, we're here serving the Lord and you're out there spending all of your life making money…so why don't you give us enough of it so that we can serve the Lord, because you're not*."' So, do you understand what's being said here…do you understand what revelation of God through Isaiah is saying? '*Yeah, I'm in the business of saving souls…but you know what the purpose of saving souls is?* ***The renewal of creation***. *The whole purpose of saving the spiritual souls is to renew creation*.'

Do you realize when we get to what Isaiah was prophesying…when we get to the new heavens and earth, I'll be out of a job…all the souls will be saved…but we'll still need musicians…we'll still need architects…we'll still need investment bankers. Some of you are going to have to train me. I'm

going to have to be apprenticed. You see, if the Spirit of God is not only a preacher…but also an artist (and the Bible says so)…also a gardener (Psalm 104:30…"*the Spirit of God renews the face of the earth*"…even as John 16 says, "*the Spirit is in the world to convict the world of sin, and righteousness and judgment*.") So, if the Spirit is not only preaching… saving souls…but also committed to creation…and committed to renewing creation…and investing in creation…drawing out its potentialities…if the whole purpose of saving souls is the renewal of creation, then, how dare we say…and the church does say, *that us ministers are the ones saving the world and doing God's work…but the rest of you, 'just give me the money so I can do it.'*

How wrong is that? There is no view of the world…and I go so far as to say there is no religion…and every religion has something…but, there's no religion that gives you more reason to do cultural activity than Christianity. You know why? Because, like I said, there are religions that say this material world isn't real…there's other religions that say this material world is debasing…and then there's the secular world that says '*this world is real, but eventually it's going to burn up*.' But…**the Bible says that cultural activity will go on forever**. And that's even what redemption is about—to get back to the place where we really, really can do the work that God originally gave us to do…endlessly! Unfrustratingly! Doing our art…doing our music…doing our business…doing our work… doing our carpentry.

The Brokenness of Culture

We also learn here about the brokenness of culture…and you learn it a little bit by negation. Because we have here a perfect human culture… everything is working right…and as we saw in verses 18, 19, and 20… there's no violence here, no exploitation here…notice, all the races are

getting together and working together…so there's no class conflict…no racial conflict…there's no marginalization…there's no sorrow…there's no hopelessness. But, we know by way of contrast, that **our culture is filled with those things**…WHY? Not because cultural activity per se is wrong, but it's the reason why it's being done. The reason why in this passage it's a perfect human culture…is because all the cultures are bringing their riches…, and over and over it says, 'we're doing our work for the glory of God.'

Let me show what the alternative is! Genesis 11 talks about the first… at least in the Bible …the Biblical description…the first city being built… the Tower of Babel …the city of Babel . Inherently, there is absolutely nothing wrong with architecture, as we've been seeing…there's nothing wrong with the economics behind it…the physical sciences that it would have taken…the art that it would have taken. You're building a city…all the activities are inherently good, and yet…Genesis 11:4 says, the reason that everybody was involved…they said, "***let us do this to make a name for ourselves***." What this is saying, is very, very important. Obviously our work is important to human fulfillment. God is a worker, and if God's Spirit does all this, and we're made in His image, therefore doing my job well is crucial to my fulfillment as a human being…because I'm made in the image of God. Having said that, if you get to the place where your work and your job is the way you know you are important, it's the only way to know you're important…the main way you know you're important…it's the main way you know you have value…when that begins to happen, ***then you see destructiveness in the culture***.

Do you know how that works? Surely you know how that works!! Think about how many English names are actually jobs: Baker, Smith, Fisher, etc. And it's natural to say, '*that's a part of who I am*.' That's why

the job became part of the name. But when you get to the place when your identity is no more than your work…your job, it brings destructiveness in your life. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a doctor and preacher, said many years ago that he knew many physicians (and the quote is gender exclusive – **it was 70 years ago** in Britain)…"*I can't tell you how many doctors, my physician friends…how many doctors when they die, you should put this on their tombstone should read: 'Born a man, died a doctor*.'" And what he meant by that was that **it's very, very difficult not to look at your job**…to look at your work, and not to say, '*Now I know I'm important…look at the status…look at the money…look at what I am doing*.'

Dorothy Sayers says, "*it would be utterly revolutionary if we changed that. The destructiveness comes when work becomes an end in itself. It is not for the Lord or the flourishing of His creation. You're not bring your peculiar honors to Him…*" like people are in this passage. You're doing it to make a name for yourself…to be sure that you have security for your family. That sounds innocent…but what it does…it leads to exhaustion…it leads to taking jobs that you really don't like but you to '*make it up in the world*.' It leads to superiority…and, very often it leads to ruthlessness… and therefore to the destruction of human community. It leads to exploitation. It leads to 'sadness.' It leads to drivenness. It leads to marginalization…it leads to conflicts. Sayers wrote a fascinating little statement about this right after World War II in Britain …she said:

The habit of thinking about work as something that one does to make money and to get a position in society is so ingrained in us that we can scarcely imagine what an absolutely revolutionary change it would be to think otherwise. People become doctors not primarily to relieve suffering, but to bring themselves and their family up in the world.

People become lawyers not because they have a passion for justice, but to bring themselves and their family up in the world. But, during World War II, one of the great surprises that many of us had in the army was that we found ourselves ***for the very first time in our lives happy****. Why? Because for the first time in our lives, we found ourselves doing something not for the pay, because it was miserable, and not for the social standing (and all the different classes in Britain were all thrown together), but for the sake of working together to get something done that benefited everyone.*"

In a small way, she was saying, in the British army during World War II, they began to experience a little bit of shalom. Instead of people out there basically to make money…and get social standing…to get ahead, they began to work together for the flourishing of the human community. It was a major step away from "*making a name for myself*." The next thing they knew, they found themselves happy…the next thing they knew *they were helping*. The rest of the passage, at the end of the war, "*we all went back to our jobs and things were the way they always were*."

Daniel Bell, has a great book (kind of old now) called *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* ***[xxxiv]***, and is a really important reading [xxxv]. He basically says this:

Economic growth is fueled by things like thrift, honesty, and delayed gratification. In other words, people who see that other things are more than profit, actually fuel profitability. But, when profit becomes the ultimate, it eats away at delayed gratification…it eats away at thrift… it eats away at honesty, and it thus destroys the very basis for economic productivity.

That's exactly what you have, according to the Bible, in human culture

today. Brokenness that comes when work becomes an ultimate…you're basing your identity on it… profit becomes an ultimate, it's not a means to an end but an end in itself. But, if and when you get an identity…a sense of being a special creation of God…and being loved in a way that is so deep …apart from your work…and if and when you get an allegiance that is above and beyond making money…and profit, and gaining status…***then the way you do your work will begin to renew culture***.

We can't bring in utopia. But, if you're able to change in those areas, you become part of cultural renewal. The way in which you manage people and the way in which you treat your own money…think about that…why do we hold onto our money? Because…we need to live in certain places…and we need to have certain things, so we can feel a certain way about ourselves…because we're not totally secure on the inside of who we are. You know what happens when you work, to make a name for yourself, then the work is not about the work…it's not about the people you're helping…and it's certainly not about the LORD…**IT'S ABOUT YOU**!! And your money…is you…and so you have to hold on to it…it's the way of making sure you're secure! BUT, when God becomes your security rather than money…when God becomes your security… when God becomes your identity…when God becomes your validity…God becomes your beauty…well, then money just becomes money. You can just give it away…because it is no longer your identity. And that brings about justice and that brings about flourishing of human community. The culture is broken at its heart…but you can begin to be an agent of renewal.

The True Diversity of Culture

This is a brief, but very interesting point, in the text. Not only does the

Bible tells us about the goodness of cultural activity…and the brokenness of human culture…but it ALSO says there's a true diversity of culture. What's intriguing about both Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21 and 22, is that **national, racial, and cultural distinctions are sustained in the new heavens and new earth**. It says, "every tongue, tribe, and nation," are now, according to the book of Revelation, in the city of God … which means there are different tongues, tribes, peoples, and nations. And, notice…**every culture brings something different**. Some cultures bring the herd. Some cultures bring the gold. Some cultures bring the incense. Why? What does this mean? And yet they must come and offer it to the Lord. And that means two things:

1. It must mean that as no individual has all the talents…and only when we're working together can we get things done…it must mean that God has put His common grace into every single culture. So that every culture has certain themes, and certain strengths and has contributions to make to the entire flourishing of the human race ***that can't be replaced***. We need them all. It's the only possible explanation for the fact that all the nations come and they maintain their ability to do certain things… because culture is just like people…with certain talents and certain themes, and therefore certain goods that the whole human race needs. That's marvelous. God does not want cultural homogeneity. And yet…

2. ***We must bring our gifts to the Lord***. Every culture, like every human being and every profession, has its strengths…some cultures it's in the individuals…some the family…some power…some wisdom…some tradition…some skepticism and questioning. They all have something to bring. But when these themes become ultimates…when you make an idol of the family…when you make an idol of individual freedom, then they becomes destructive. Therefore, God is saying, '*You must be converted in*

the heart…and make Me the center of your life. And then your culture will work the way it is supposed to work.' And then you'll be making a contribution to the human race instead of hurting the human race by the idolization of your particular strength…and theme.

Now, a lot of people get upset at this point and they say, '*wait a minute. You're trying to say that even though all these cultures are good…they need to be converted? That is the trouble with you Christians: you're always trying to convert people. You must not impose your culture on somebody else by trying to make them become a Christian*.' I would like to challenge that. What these people are really saying…or implying…is that Christianity belongs to some cultures but not all. Lamin Sanneh…and this is a very powerful point (I didn't come up with it…like all my powerful points) Lamin Sanneh, African scholar who teaches at Yale…has written an extremely important book called *Whose Religion is Christianity?* ***[xxxvi]*** …in that book, he addresses the fact that Africa…[you know Korea has gone from 2% Christian to like 50% Christian or more in a hundred years)…Africa has gone from 9% to 60% Christian in a hundred years, and it's growing twice as fast as Islam…it's growing 7-10 times the population growth]…and Lamin Sanneh says, "*I'm tired of people saying, 'oh you Christians mustn't impose your culture on them… you mustn't try to convert Africans, because you're destroying their culture. In other words, 'Christianity belongs to you…but it doesn't belong to us? How dare you*!!'" He comes up with a theory in the book that is fascinating. He says: "***Every culture has a baseline narrative***."

You know how in the Bible, Paul talks about the cultures of his day…"t*he Jews want power, and the Greeks want wisdom*." Every culture has a theme. Every culture has certain things that they're after.

And Lamin Sanneh says, African culture understands that the world is filled with spiritual forces…especially, lots and lots of dark spiritual forces. So, how are we going to address that? So they looked at their tribal religions and though they believed in those spiritual forces, they had no answer as to how to overcome them. And then, they looked at the modern secularism that was coming, and they realized that modern secularism laughed at their African-ness, because it says "you can't believe in miracles…you can't believe in demons…" just laughed at our African-ness. **THAT…that is cultural totalitarianism**. Then they looked at Christianity…and this is what Lamin Sanneh says has been happening:

"*Christianity answered the great cultural challenge of our hearts… People sensed in their hearts that Jesus did not mock their respect for the sacred…and Christianity did not mock their clamor for an invincible Savior, and* ***so they beat their sacred drums for Him until the stars skipped and danced in the skies. And after the dance, the stars weren't little anymore****. Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans…not remade Europeans.*"

There is a true cultural diversity; God does not want homogeneity. But, God also says, '***Come to me****. And then…the great Grace I've given to every culture…the plotline of the story of every one of your cultures will only find its happy ending in Me.*' So…we have the goodness of culture…we have the brokenness of culture…we have the diversity of culture, and last of all…

The Key to the Redemption of Culture

What is the key to the redemption of culture? The answer here is <u>light</u>. I didn't include in our text the very first verses of our passage…the last part of the verses talk about ***God as the light***…we don't even need the

sun or the moon…in this new culture, because God is the light. And the very beginning of the chapter, verse 1 & 2 says, "*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you; darkness covers the earth and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you and nations will come to your light…and kings to the brightness of Your dawn.*"

There is a light that attracts the cultures…and they stream in…and the light heals them (Is 60:1-3). What is that all about? Well…let me tell you what I think it's about. Saint Augustine , very famously said that there is a God-shaped hole in every life. Now, let's scroll forward and just use a slightly more modern metaphor…*there's a black hole in your life.* Do you know what a black hole is? A God-shaped hole of course means that you were made for God. You're going to have an infinite need for affirmation…do you realize that? It doesn't matter how much your spouse tells you that you're great…it doesn't matter how much money you make…it doesn't matter what's happened in your life. You know, there are not many of us who've really gotten to the top of our goals *list.* But, there are a few people who get way beyond their goals…become much more famous and much more loved and much more acclaimed that they could have imagined…and they USUALLY WANT TO KILL themselves. Because…there is an infinite black hole in the center of our lives that needs affirmation and love. It's a black hole because it even swallows up light. It's that deep!! And what we're doing is working ourselves to death…and we're in many cases being ruthless about getting up the ladder, even though we're not doing anything illegal…and we're very often making money at the expense of other people around us…in other words, our work isn't for the Lord. IT"S for us…and not for human flourishing. There's a darkness in us.

Now…when God "*comes back into the world*" after The Fall, and every time He "*comes back*" there is a certain amount of light (the burning bush…*but don't come too close*; down on Mount Sinai…*pillar of fire*). Moses said, "*let me see Your glory*" We hunger for the light. We need the light. There is this darkness in us. But God says, '***I can't let you see the light because it will kill you***.' Because, you see, there's a darkness in us which is sin, and there is a holiness in Him…and that's a barrier. However, even though Isaiah says '*the light is God*,' in Revelation, John can see just a little more clearly, and what does he say? He said, "*the Holy City shone with the glory of God…it's brilliance was like a precious jewel*." Now, every other place in the Bible that the glory of God comes down…you've got to get out, or it will kill you.

But here, the glory of God has come down on the whole city…here the glory of God is purifying everything. And the light that we hunger for has come, but it is not fatal…WHY? It says, "*The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light…and the Lamb of God is the lamp*." Why not the Lion of God? Why not the Lord? Why not Jesus? It says, the lamb, and I'll tell you why. In Matthew 27:45-46, "*from the sixth hour to the ninth hour darkness came over all the land… and in the ninth hour, Jesus Christ cried, 'My God, My God!! Why hast thou forsaken me?'*" ***Jesus took the cosmic darkness so that we could have the light***. He paid for our sins so that we could have the light. Then Jesus says, in John 12:32 , "*And when I am lifted up on the Cross, I will draw all people to myself*."

Let me tell you what this light is that will draw all the nations to the Lord for healing? It's the light of the cross. When I was listening to the talk by Richard Mouw, to business leaders, he articulated a very important Christian principle that you need to take out into your business

life…and it will renew culture. And it will follow Christ…and you'll never necessarily mention the name "Jesus." Everybody looked at him rather quizzically, and he said, '*let me explain*.' Here's the principle: '*If you want to be cultural leaders that renew culture and renew human flourishing, then* ***bear more pain than you inflict***. *Bear more pain than you inflict*.' Now, here's what he means. If you're going to be a leader, you're going to inflict pain. Sometimes you're going to do layoffs… sometimes you're going to do things that inflict pain.

But what's actually happening out there, in our world, is that most leaders actually WANT to inflict more pain than they bear. When someone underneath them does something good, they take the credit for themselves. And when they do something wrong, they pass the blame somewhere else. That's the way of the world. Make sure that you inflict more pain than you bear. But Mouw says, *be like Jesus*.

I remember some years ago there was a woman I talked to after church…I asked her how she'd heard about Redeemer. She said…'*oh, that's quite a story…I don't even think I believe Christianity…but I've been coming for three or four weeks. And, I'm still not sure that I believe in Christianity…but it's interesting*.' So, I asked her, '*how'd you get here*.' It turned out that she worked for a big company in the city…and at one point though she'd only been working for a couple of years at this 'big company,' she made a really stupid move. Made a mistake. And she thought it would cost her her job. And her boss took all the heat. Took the blame…basically said '*it was my fault…my fault…my fault*.' So, she went in to see him, and she said, '*You know, I've been through this before…I've been working in this city for quite a while, and I've always seen superiors take the credit from their inferiors, but never take the blame. I'd never seen that*.'

He said, '*well, you know, I've actually got a good reputation here…I know this has hurt my reputation a bit, but it's certainly not hurting my job…I've got a lot of "capital" as it were…human capital…and I could afford it…and you couldn't.*' But, **she kept pressing him**…'*but that doesn't make sense…that's way too different…I don't understand. What's your motivation…you hardly know me.*' Finally he said, '*listen…I wouldn't say this but you're pressing me…I'm a Christian…Jesus took the blame for me…Jesus took the hit for me…I'm just trying to pay Him back a little.*'

She said, '*where do you go to church*?' It was here…

If we pour ourselves out for the people under us, if we pour ourselves out for the people around us…whether they believe as we do or not… whether they ever believe as we do…we CAN help make this a great city at our expense…whether they believe like we do or not…that's the light that will draw them to the nations. **Then…and only then do we have the right to say here is how you can be converted to Jesus Christ**. When people are saying, 'where do you go to church?'

"*When I am lifted up, I will draw all nations to Myself*," says Jesus. You want to be part of that…have that splendor on you…so that they're being attracted to Him …**Be agents of cultural renewal by walking in His footsteps.**

READING 10 – THE GOSPEL AND YOUR WEALTH

Malachi 3: 1-4; 8-10. 4:1-6

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. 8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

4: 1 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. 2 But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. 3 Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day

when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty. 4 "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel . 5 "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

If you're going to be part of a community that truly cares about New York City [or the community in which YOU live], it will **entail a new understanding of and relationship to your money**. When I first came to New York , I wanted to be receptive to people's needs. And what people were always asking me to preach and teach about was sex. Lots of questions about sex…'Am I handling it right?…'…'Is this health or unhealthy?' Nobody ever, ever asked me to teach about money. Nobody ever said, '*Oh, I'm having so much trouble handling my money. I don't know if I'm spending too much on myself or not.*' **NO, don't go there**!! Don't you dare preach and teach about that. And yet, I've come to see over the years that there's *ten to twenty times more in the Bible about money than about sex*. Why would that be? I think that'll become clear as we take a look at this passage…especially the first half of this passage… and we're going to see, in this prophecy of Malachi, (**1**) **how** money exercises power over us, (**2**) **why** money exercises power over us, and (**3**) **how** we can break the power.

How Money Exercises Power over Us

In verses 8 and 9 there is a question. God asks, "***Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me***." Hebrew experts have puzzled over this for years, because the word "rob" here is a very rare word …not at all the normal Hebrew word for "rob." Robbery is just taking something that doesn't belong to you. This word though, is only used one other place in

the Bible, and it's a word that really means "to oppress"…it means "to pillage, or plunder." It's the sort of word you would use to describe a wealthy powerful country coming in and despoiling and plundering and raping a weaker or poorer town. *It's a very violent word*. The reason why people have wondered about this, is because it seems completely incongruous that God would use that word, and literally say '***you're doing that to Me***.' For God to say to human beings, 'you're doing that to Me,' when it means to pillage…to plunder someone's turf…someone's home…someone's town. And of course, when the people hear this they are shocked, and they say: '***What****? How in the world can we be robbing you? What are you talking about?*' And then, God, in essence replies, '*I'm talking about your lack of generosity with money. I'm talking about the fact that you hold on to too much of it, and you spend too much of it on yourself, and you don't give enough of it away*.' Now…this verse 8, where God says "you rob me"…and He's talking about stinginess…what you and I would call stinginess…He is communicating that a lack of generosity is something that is ***much more cosmic and much more evil*** than we think. The fact that we are oblivious to it…we're asking ourselves, 'how could this be?' reveals how money exercises power over us. The **cosmic evil** of it and our **blindness to it**!!

First, let's look at "**the evil of it**." In 1 Chronicles chapters 28 and 29, David and the children of Israel were raising money to build a temple. In the process, at one point David prayed to God…after they'd been giving their money…saying, "*Everything in heaven and earth is Yours…wealth and honor come from You…everything comes from You…and we have only given You what comes from Your hand*," (29:14). Notice what David is saying…here are the principles…**first** of all David is saying that anything you have is a gift from God. Now, that may seem bizarre to you, because you say, '*I have worked very hard for what I have…*' **BUT**,

you've worked very hard for what you have *with abilities, opportunities, and circumstances…and health and various things…that God provided.* So, you may say 'I've worked very hard for what I have…I am what I am because I've worked very hard…'…but, ***if*** *God had decided you were going to be born on a mountain in Mongolia, in the 11th century, I don't think you be doing as well.* No matter how hard you worked. You'd like to say, 'oh*, it's all a matter of my work*,' but it's really a matter of your circumstances. It's a matter of your abilities and opportunities…and God gave those to you. And if you have more wealth than someone else, ordinarily it's because you have had more opportunities and abilities… and better circumstances that God has given you. So, **everything you have is a gift**!!

Secondly, however, did you notice that **God doesn't give up ownership of something when He gives it to you**? Everything you have is not only a gift of God, but everything you have…God is still the ultimate owner. You have been given it…yes…but you're relate to your money the way a money manager relates to the wealth of his investors… his clients. You're to relate to your money not as an owner but as a broker, as a steward. If, as a money manager, and you see your funds grow…and investors giving you more and more money to invest for them, **you get excited…**because you're going to eat the fruit of that…but you don't have the slightest idea, or belief…I hope…that those funds are yours…that you can do whatever you want with it. There's an accountability, in line with the directions of…and in line with the purposes of, desires of, and values of the investors…and if you don't do that, it's called FRAUD.

God is the great Creator Investor. And everything you have, has been given to you by **God…and you're HIS money manager**. But we know

from the Bible what His values are. We've been reviewing "His values" in the previous Readings . Especially in the Reading on justice. God created the world to be an interwoven, interdependent place of shalom and harmony and peace. When God gives you…when God gives you more opportunity and ability, and therefore a little more wealth than someone else… **He wants you to plow your wealth into the human community**…He wants you to share that wealth with people who do not have as much. What happens when you do that…if you're willing to share and plow the money He's given you back into the human community in great proportions…then there will be shalom. You'll have an interwovenness…you've got strong human community. All the religious institutions…the public and the private…and the social institutions all will be flourishing. The schools will be good and affordable. The streets will be safe.

But if, you deny the gift nature of what you have…if you deny the money manager role that God has given you…and you think of yourself as just an owner of everything you've got…if you basically use it for yourself, except for some very small amount you give to charity…**do you know what you're doing**? You're unraveling God's creation. You're plundering it…you're pillaging it…you're raping it…all of which is leading to its disintegration. You're defrauding your **Investor**. That's a great cosmic evil. That's not just stinginess. But not only does verse 8 tells us what it means to rob God, but verse 8 also tells us we're oblivious to it. We don't understand what going on…how money affects us

So**, secondly** we need to consider **"our blindness to it."** Money has power over us, and a great deal of the power money has over us is it blinds us to the power it has. Money is different from other things, because you're blind to how much it's affecting you. Implied in this text,

explicitly in other places in the Bible…materialism and greed is **a sin of the "eye**." It blinds you to its presence. Well, you ask, "what is materialism?" Materialism and greed, is excess concern for, worry about, love of, and need for money and possessions. And, over and over the Bible says unlike other kinds of sins…unlike other kinds of wrongs… unlike other kinds of character flaws, this one you can't see in yourself… because of the power of it.

In Luke 12, Jesus says "watch out for all forms of greed." Watch out… for all the forms it takes!! Now…think…is there any place where Jesus says, 'w*atch out for all forms of adultery*?' No…and you know why!! Is it because adultery is ok? No, of course not! This is why the Bible talks much more about money than sex…not because money is more important than sex…but because you're blind to it. When you are committing adultery, you *know* you are doing it. You don't say, '***OH**, you're not my wife*.' You know it's not your wife!! You know it's not your husband. Jesus doesn't ever say, '*watch out, you might be committing adultery and not know it*.' YOU know it!! So, what is Jesus saying when He says, "watch out for all kinds of greed?" Why does the Bible keep talking about it?…'cause you almost never know that you're guilty of greed and materialism. Over the years I've had people come to me and confess nearly every sin to me…I'm a pastor, ***people come and confess…but never greed…never materialism***.

I remember some years ago I was doing a series on the seven deadly sins…not here but in another place. And my wife Cathy asked, '*When do you get to greed*?' I said, '*oh…that week*.' To which she replied, '*You watch…the attendance will the worst of all seven*.' And it was. And do you know why…**it's not because** they didn't want to hear about it… about a sermon on greed…**it's because NOBODY thinks it's their**

problem. People will say, '*I've got a problem with anger*.' Or, '*I've got a problem with pride*.' Or, '*I've got a problem with lust*.' '***Greed****...not me?*!!' Often you spend lots of time around people who spend lots more than you do, on themselves, so, **you ALWAYS feel** middle class and frugal...no matter who you are!! And because of the nature of money, it has the power to blind you to its power.

Now, if it's true that the Bible speaks incessantly about greed and materialism, because it's rampant...and if it's also true that God sees it as eroding and pillaging and plundering His Creation...it's destroying the fabric of society...if it's rampant, and nobody believes that it's true of them, then, virtually everyone who is "doing it" is blind to it...and therefore I would propose this to each of you:

If you take the texts of the Bible seriously, you should make it your working hypothesis that it is also true of you.

I'm not saying it's necessarily true of you, I'm just saying that the only way for you to give any credence to what the Bible says...though almost nobody believes that they're characterized by greed and materialism...yet it's rampant...the only way to respond to that is to be ***always be checking on yourself***. Always go with the working hypothesis that '*it may be true of you...to some degree*.'

Now, you might be saying, '*are you just trying to make me feel guilty*?' NO, I just don't want you to trust yourself. Ask yourself...when was the last time you sat down...just by yourself and asked yourself, 'do I really need all this stuff that I've got? Could I not be giving significantly more of my money away? When's the last time you "*went there*?"' Do you see how hard that is? That's...because of the power of money. Here's what I'm saying...if you do go '*there*,' don't you dare go *there* alone. Don't you

dare go *there* alone. How could you trust yourself like that? There's somebody else you need to be talking to about it. Don't trust yourself. The **working hypothesis** is…since almost everybody infected with greed and materialism is blind to it, everybody who takes the Bible texts seriously needs to be saying, "MAYBE IT'S ME!!" And you're always checking for it. Always.

The Bible does give you one guideline by which you can check yourself, so you can see whether or not your understanding of giving and generosity to charities and ministries is in any way in the ballpark of what God says it ought to be. And…the way the Bible speaks to you…and it's not the only way…one way He gives you to test yourself is with a standard that's right here in this passage. It's called the tithe. Tithe…10%…ten percent!! "*You ask, 'how do we rob you Lord?' In tithes and offerings. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse*" (which is the temple…and we'll get to that). The Bible makes it very clearly, particularly in the Old Testament…in the Hebrew scriptures, God required that all people give away 10% of their annual income to charity and ministry. That <u>always raises the question</u> whether or not the tithe **is an obligation for Christians**…in the New Testament.

Now, the only place in the New Testament where the tithe is mentioned is a very significant place…in Luke 11:42 Jesus is talking with the Pharisees, and this is what He says: "*Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth… but you neglect justice and the love of God…you should have practiced the latter, without leaving the former tithe 'undone.'*" So you see, **first** of all, it's right to tithe, but what He's really saying to the Pharisees is, 'You know…sometimes there's a need in the community…there's **a need out there, the needs to be met** financially, that love or justice demands that you meet it. *But you*

(Pharisees) have a <u>legalistic limitation</u> and you think that "as long as I'm giving my 10a%, EVERYTHING ELSE is MINE!! All the rest of its mine. And you refuse to go beyond the tithe and it shows that you're a legalist…and you're not being run by love and justice due to your legalistic code of conduct."' Now, that's a pretty significant statement.

In the rest of the New Testament…though Jesus says that "tithing is right"…tithing is never mentioned. What are the implications of that? I think this is what it means. **We could never expect that God would say that His New Testament people, with greater blessings and greater privileges, should expect to give less than the Old Testament people of God**. That just doesn't make any sense. My guess is the reason it's not mentioned a whole lot, nor harped on, is because we're not supposed to see it as a legalistic limit to our giving, but as a baseline…a guideline…a rule of thumb…a beginning. Start there. Make sure you're in the ballpark and see what you can do beyond that. It is likely that many would say, '*well, that's just absolutely nuts…it's way, way too much*?' It's because you trust yourself. Don't' trust yourself… that's what this is for…don't trust your instincts…don't trust what your heart thinks is enough. There…that's how money exercises power over us…so you see *why nobody ever asks me to "teach on money!*!"

Why Does Money Have This Power over Us?

To answer this question, 'why does money have this power over ME?'…we need to look at verse 10, where God says, "B***ring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house***." The word "house" means God's temple. And up in verse 1 and 2 we see that He's talking about the temple. So…here's what God is saying to His people: '*make sure that you give your gold, silver, and first fruits into the storehouse in My temple*.' How does that translate to us? If God is

telling the people in Malachi's time, "give your money into the storehouse of the temple," how does that translate for us…what does it mean for us… how can we do the same thing today?

Let's look at these two terms: **temple** and **storehouse**. (1) What does it mean for us to give to the temple today? An awfully lot of ministers over the years have said, '*Oh…in the Old Testament the people gave their whole 10% to the temple…and in the New Testament…you don't go to the temple but to the local church…so you must give your whole 10% to your place of worship. The whole tithe…see…'**whole**!!' All 10% must go your church. We're the temple now…we're the local church…and if you want to giving else beyond that…it's fine…but WE need to get the whole 10%*'" **I don't believe that**! I don't believe you can read that into the verse. Here's the reason why. The temple was not a local church. You didn't have a lot of little temples on every corner. <u>The temple was not a '*local body*.</u>' Most people didn't go to the temple because it was too far away. The temple was the institutional seat of the service of God for the entire society. When you gave your money to the temple, <u>it supported the spiritual community</u> of the entire country. And when you gave your money to the temple, <u>it supported the poor</u> in the entire culture.

There is **no one church** and there is **no one organization or charity** in our lives today that is parallel to that; in that there is no one organization or church that you can give to…one that would give that kind of comprehensive help to the human community that the tithe made possible in the '*giving to the temple*.' There just isn't anything like that. So…for us, to give our whole tithe to the temple, simply means that you give all you should be giving to charity and ministry…but there's *no single ministry or charity* for you to do that anymore. If you come to "this

church," you do not have to give your whole 10%...or whatever you give ... you give it to your place of worship and other charities and ministries. Of course, I've had people say, '*oh, my goodness, aren't you afraid that you're eroding the financial support of the local church*?' NO!!

The problem with this country and this world is not that people don't give enough to their local church. The problem is that they don't give in Biblical proportions...**out of Biblical joy**. If we were all giving in this proportion...***it would float all the boats***. This church would have all that it could handle. And all the other charities and all the other institutions and all the other ministries would too. We're not going to overcome the problem by saying, '*make sure you give it all to me.*' A few weeks ago, a woman said to me, '*I give a lot of money to a Christian ministry which serves people with aids Africa . Please make the case for me...tell me why I should give to the your Vision Campaign instead of to this "aids ministry*.'" I said to her,

I would never tell you that. Please think about this...there is no way that the Vision Campaign is something every giver should be giving to, rather than aids in Africa, as if it were more important than aids in Africa. Nor should anybody say aids in Africa is more important that our Campaign...you must follow your heart and see what God is laying on your heart...what resonates with you. Because, both of these ministries are doing both justice and preaching grace and healing the world with your wealth.

But...you see, ***if we were all giving in Biblical proportion, and with Biblical joy...all the boats would be floated***. You don't have to say, '*oh...no, no, no...my ministry is more important than that ministry*.' I would never tell anyone what ministry they should give to over another. Never!! So...giving to the temple does not mean 10% to the

local church. However…

The **second issue**…the second little phrase, "*give to the storehouse in the temple*"…here, if we come to understand the meaning of this this word, we start to get to the real reason why money has such power over us. The word "*storehouse*" in Hebrew means ***treasury***. I wish there were some translation that would translate it that way…I think it would be helpful…so then you'd have, '***bring your treasure into the treasury***.' The storehouse was the place where the silver, gold, jewels, and wealth were kept. And in every temple in the world you'll find a treasury, and it was out of the treasury that support came for the worship and salvation system of that particular '*deity's temple*.' When God says '*bring Me the whole tithe…put the whole tithe into My treasury…into My temple…into the service of My salvation, into the worship of Me*,' the implication is that if you are not doing that, your tithe is in some other temple, and some other treasury.

You may be saying, '*what do you mean by that*?' Well…let me give you three quick examples. (**1**) If you find that it's very hard to give away money…*it's just hard*…w*riting those checks…it's just difficult*…but, if you find it to be incredibly easy to spend money on clothes…*like falling off a log*…you know, you have to watch yourself…it's effortless…<u>your wardrobe is your real temple</u>. The real treasury of your real temple…because what you're really doing, no matter what you say you believe, you're looking to your personal appearance and how people perceive you physically to get a sense of desirability and of acceptability and of lovability rather than looking to the love of God. (**2**) If you find it difficult to give your money away but very easy to put it into a beautiful new house, then that's your real temple. Because…what you're really doing…you're saying, '*Look at where I can live and look at who I am*.' You're looking **to *that*** to make

you feel important…**to *that*** to make you feel significant rather than to the knowledge of God. (**3**) There are many of you who look at others spending money on homes, on clothes, on trifles…and you just sneer. You love saying, '*I've had this thing for two years*!!' You just sneer at those spending money in a way '*I'd never think of doing* '(proudly).' But…you sock it all away into savings and securities and investments…and you're so proud of yourself…that you live in a small apartment…and you don't have a whole lot of money…and you're very, very proud of your frugality…**but listen**, you're just as much under the power of money. If you find it's very hard to give money away, but very easy to save it…then your bank account is your temple…your brokerage is you temple. Here's what you're doing…instead of God, you're looking to your money and savings and investments for control in a very, very chaotic world…rather than to God. You look at the amounts…you think about it in your mind…'*I've got this much now…hey, if I lose my job, I'm ok…if I lose a career, I'm ok…if this happens or that happens I'm going to be ok…I've got control in an uncontrollable world*.'

Instead of God, I've got beauty because I've got these great clothes. Instead of God I've got status and respect. It's always effortless…like falling off a log…***it's effortless to spend money on that which is your real god***. Money just flows into the treasury of your real temple. Don't you see…***anything*** it is easy to spend money on <u>is your real god</u>, your real savior and lord. It's the source of your hope, meaning, happiness, significance, and security…no matter what you say you believe. There's a term in English – *the all might dollar* – which is a way of getting across the idea that some people worship money. That's not really true. Money, however, will always show you what you do worship. See, there person who's socking it away and saying, '*look, I don't spend anything on myself* …while sneering at the people who have lavish homes

and terrific clothes…that person is investing his or her money in a security idol; for others, money serves as an approval idol…for some it's a security idol…for some it's a control idol. The point is, if you find it much, much easier to spend money on anything, rather than giving it away to charity and ministry…you're enslaved to an idol. Your money's in a treasury…your money's in a temple, but it's not God's. That's why money has the power of you…that it does.

Before moving to the next point…please understand that money can't possibly give you what you think it can. The idols that you're using money to get…Never…never will they give you what you want. Security?…do you really think money can make you secure? I'll never forget my professor Dr. Addison Leach, told a story about two young women at the college where he was teaching…they were both bright and their respective parents wanted them to get Master's Degrees…and wanted them to go on to careers…however, they both became Christians at the school and both decided that they were going to become missionaries. Their parents had a fit. One of the mothers called Dr. Leach, thinking that Dr. Leach was one of the reasons that the girls had become "*religious fanatics*, rather than pursuing the course they had hoped…getting a career and having security. Instead they were going to go wildly off *into the blue*.

This mother said, "*we wanted our daughter to get a master's degree… and start a career…and get something in the bank…so she could have some security*. Realizing only after the fact that he had been a bit too harsh, Dr. Leach responded: "*Please just let me remind you of something. We're all on a little ball of rock called earth…and we're spinning along through space at zillions of miles per hour…and even if we don't run in to anything, eventually we're all going to die…which means that under every single one of us…there's a trap door that's going*

to open one day and we're all going to fall off this ball of rock. And underneath will either be the everlasting arms of God or absolutely nothing…and maybe…we can get a master's degree…to get some security."

The biggest savings account in the world cannot stop cancer…it can't stop traffic accidents…it cannot stop broken hearts. It can't give you anything…any of the things that only God can give you. He's the only security you have…He's the only significance you can have. He's the only love that you can get…***that you can't lose.***

How Do We Break the Power of Money over Us?

The answer is <u>the temple</u>…verses 1 and 2. **"***See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before Me, and suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple…the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, the LORD Almighty*." Now**…**every 'gospel' in the New Testament says that this is a prophecy of what was to happen. The messenger…*'who will prepare my way before Me*'…Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all say, it's John the Baptist. And the Lord who was going to come to His temple is Jesus. So, when Jesus rode in to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and was declared the Messiah, the first thing He did…was to go to the temple. And what did He do there? He started throwing things around. He started tearing down things…and in John 2:19 when the Pharisees came and said, '*how dare you do this…what right do you have to do this*,' Jesus Christ said, "T*ear this temple down and in three days I will build it back up*." And by that He meant, *His body*. Jesus Christ was saying '**kill Me…in three days not only this temple but every temple in the world will be "out of business**.'" This is the most stunning thing that any human being has ever said.

Every other religious leader…who ever 'showed up,' brought temples and houses of worship. You know why? Because, every religion recognizes there is an infinite chasm between deity and humanity that has to be bridged. And so every single religious founder brings codes of conduct, and rituals, and sacrificial systems, and mediatorial systems, and priests, and houses, and temples…and…they all say that if you do these things, ***you* can bridge that gap**. Jesus Christ is the only one that says, '*I lived the life you should have lived. I died the death you should have died. My destroyed and resurrected body is the bridge over the chasm between deity and humanity because I fell into that infinite chasm and paid the penalty for you. I am the ultimate priest that ends all priests. I am the ultimate sacrifice that ends all sacrifice. I am the ultimate temple. I've come to replace the temple. I've come to tear it to pieces*.'

Now, if that's the case, what has that got to do with your money? Where's the "real treasury now?" Here!! Jesus said '***where your heart is, there is your treasure***.' Here's what He means by that: ever person reading these words, you have set your heart on something…something you say, '*if I have that…I will have significance and security*'…it could be your children, it could be your status, it could be your career, it could be a certain amount of money in the bank. It could be physical beauty. You set your heart on something…and whatever your soul's treasure is, whatever your heart's treasure is…whenever your heart has determined "what that is," you will do anything for it…you will die for it…you will pay any cost for it. You'll do anything necessary to maintain it…to sustain it…to reclaim it.. **Jesus Christ came and died for you**. Why would He do that? There is only one answer. Why would He go to Hell? Why would He experience the infinity of Hell? The only answer is -**you and I are His heart's treasure**. You'd do anything for your heart's treasure. You'd do anything to purchase it.

Here's what so intriguing. Every other treasure in the world will insist…will basically make you die to purchase it…but **Jesus is the only treasure that died to purchase you**. Some of you are working yourself into the ground for your career…your career is demanding that you die to purchase it. But Jesus Christ is '*the significance that dies to purchase you*.' And that's why Paul is able to put it like this (in 2 Corinthians chapter 8:7-9): "*See that you excel in this grace of giving… I'm not commanding you, but I want to test the reality of your love, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich*." Do you see what Paul is saying? He puts no pressure on the **will**…he doesn't say, '*you're Christians, I'm an apostle, you have to give so much money*.' Nor does he put pressure on the **emotions**…*'look, you've got so much and look at these poor people, and look at these little orphans with such great big eyes*.' He puts no emphasis upon emotions…he puts no pressure on your will.

So what does he say? He says, '*if you don't have the freedom to give your money away* (in eye-popping proportions) *to help heal the world with your wealth, it's because <u>something besides Jesus Christ is your functional Lord and Savior</u>*.' Think about the radical generosity of Jesus Christ on the Cross…until you get freedom. When you see Jesus Christ dying because '**You were the treasure of His heart**,' then, and **only then will He become the treasure of your heart**.

When you see that He did this…when you see that He made YOU the treasure of His heart…that will make Him the treasure of your heart. And suddenly, money won't be significance…it'll just be money because Jesus is your significance. And suddenly money will not be security, it'll just be money, and He'll be your security. **And you'll be free**. You'll finally be

free. Metaphorically, Paul said, '*don't sit down with a calculator if you want to become a giver…who can go out into the world like Jesus…and heal the world with your wealth…and give up your status…and give up your significance and security like He did.*' Sit down with the Cross in view…and think about what He did until it makes you love like He loved… and give like He gave.

READING 11 – The Gospel and Yourself

Isaiah 6: 1-13

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." 6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" 9 He said, "Go and tell this people: " 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' 10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." 11 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, 12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. 13 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the

terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

In that we're here *to build a great city, for all people, through a movement of the Gospel, that brings about personal conversion, community formation, social justice and cultural renewal in New York City, and through New York the world*...if we are going to be part of a community that **cares that much** about our city...your city...then we are going to have to get a whole new relationship to and understanding of our own individual needs. **Our needs!!** In the 1980s... Robert Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart* ***[xxxvii]***...**AND**, in the 1990s Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* ***[xxxviii]***...these sociologists revealed...actually tore the lid off the fact that **American culture was, and still is, becoming more and more self-absorbed**. There an awful lot of talk about volunteering of behalf of the poor, socially conscious business, and stopping poverty.

Yet, in our culture, we help the poor *to feel good about ourselves*. The statistics don't lie. For example, in Robert Putnam's book, ***Bowling Alone***, he notes that there's been a 25% decline in voting in the last 30 years. There's been a 50% decline in participation in social, civic, and paternal organizations. There was a 10% decline in church attendance, but a 50% decline in church activities outside of attending church services. **The key**: *there's been a substantial decline in the percentage of both citizens and the proportion of their income devoted to philanthropy and charity*. Americans inside and outside the church give a significantly smaller percentage of their income away to charity and ministry now than they did a generation ago...and a generation ago, they gave a significantly smaller percent of their income away to charity and ministry than they did a generation before that...even though, over the last 50 years, our

living standards have been going up and up enormously. And, Putnam says, '***there's been a significant decrease in both civic and social volunteering in almost every age category***.' **How** can we become less absorbed with our own individual needs? **The answer** is an encounter with God. This passage in Isaiah tell us a lot about that…about an encounter with God**.** What does it mean to actually encounter God's reality*?* It's to have (**1**) a God quake, then (**2**) a self-quake, that will eventually lead to (**3**) a world quake.

God Quake

In the beginning of this passage, Isaiah enters the temple and sees the LORD…*'high and lifted up*.' What Isaiah sees is the "**glory of the LORD**." "The whole earth is filled with His glory," verse 4…and "*At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke*." Now, the Hebrew word "*glory*" is a word that literally means "*weight*." It means the permanent versus the ephemeral and illusory…the substantial and important versus the unimportant…the real as opposed to the illusory or unreal. When the Bible talks about God's glory, it's talking about His weightiness. ***Compared to anything else, God alone is permanent, God alone is real, and God alone matters.*** For example, if you drop an object which is heavier than water into water, there will be a flood…which is basically a *water quake*. If you drop an object heavier than ice, onto ice, there's an *ice quake*. In each instance, the object has more "glory" than the either the water or the ice. When God comes *down* into your life…the reality of God comes down into your life…it changes everything around. When the reality of God came down into Isaiah's life, everything was rearranged…everything was re-engineered…*all the furniture was moved around*—his view of himself, his view of history—everything was changed.

Every single place in the Bible that God's presence comes down, there is an earthquake, because of the glory of God. God is more glorious than anything. When He comes down on Mount Sinai (Ex 19), *the mountain trembled violently*. And when He came down at Pentecost (Acts 2), the room trembled and shook violently because God's glory is ultimate. ***Compared to God, everything else has no weight.*** Whenever God's reality comes down, everything is shaken.

What I want to get across is the difference between God as a *concept* and God as a *reality*. It's the difference between believing in God versus actually having an experience of God's glory. When Isaiah walked into the temple and saw the LORD high and lifted up and His train filling the temple, he did not say, '***Oh, there really is a God***.' He already believed in God…but God was only a concept until that moment; then, God became a reality. What is the difference between a concept and a reality? It's all a matter of glory. **God as a concept is lighter than you**. When you bring God as a concept into your life, you shape **it**. **It** fits in around your existing patterns and beliefs…it doesn't move you around. It doesn't "quake" you. If you believe in God and it just hasn't changed you very much, **it**'s just a concept. A "God concept" can't really change your beliefs around…it just fits in with your existing beliefs.

We believe in God, because, oh I think there must have been a creator… or, *that makes sense the way everything is here…*or *we believe in God because in the future we hope we're going to go live in heaven with Him…*or *we believe in God because He's a 'good force in the world'…*or something like that, but basically we don't believe in God in such a way that He comes in and rearranges our beliefs. He fits in with our existing beliefs.

For example, in New York City , people are constantly saying to me,

'*well, I can't believe in this or that part of the Bible…because that's regressive…we can't believe in that anymore.*' In other words, our beliefs are rooted in our cultural moment (keep in mind that your great grandchildren are going to be just as embarrassed about half of the beliefs that you hold today as you are about the beliefs of your great grandparents). But right now, our cultural moment seems so real, that what we do…we say, '*That's real*,' and we come to the Bible, to God's Word, and we take a look and then say '*I can't believe that…I can't believe that…I can't believe that.*' In other words, you don't have a real God. You have a God as a concept. You don't have a God who can contradict you or challenge and change some of your deepest held beliefs. He fits into you. You shape the God concept; the God concept doesn't shape you. **You have more glory than the God concept**. The God concept is lighter. The God concept merely moves into the existing patterns of your beliefs and the existing patterns of your agendas and goals.

Plenty of people try to get religious: they go to church, start to pray, and read their Bibles. Why? They need help…in getting to their goals. They say, '*I need more inspiration…I need more strength. I'm having trouble reaching my goals.*' In other words, you fit God into your agenda. You fit God into your existing beliefs. **God as a concept is lighter than you**. **But**, God as a reality is heavier than you. When the real God comes into your life, when you actually get into the presence of the real God, things in your life give way to His glory. Things that you have always believed…and that you've believed very, very deeply… are changed by His Word. Because God has more glory (weight/importance) than your beliefs. He can change things that you think. Instead of God fitting into your agenda, **God becomes your new agenda**. He radically changes your priorities. Your *agenda*, and my *agenda*, apart from God, *is to have*

a very safe, tidy, little life. 'God…watch my back…help me hedge my bets…look out for No. 1…me!!' God says, '*Bravery.*' God says, '*Self-sacrifice.*' God says, '*Sacrifice your individual needs because I'm more real than your individual needs. I have glory.*'

When God "the reality" comes into your life, all those self-absorbed goals and agendas start to change. Every single person who has really met God is ***aware of a time when God went from a concept to a reality***. Has that happened to you? Now, be careful! You say, '*Well, I never had an experience just like that.*' That's alright. But, guess what, no one else did either. For example, Jeremiah…if you go to Jeremiah 1 and see when God became a reality to him…called him. Jeremiah 1…Isaiah 6… they're very different…why, because these two prophets were very different. Isaiah was a very proud man…a young man…one of the elites. Jeremiah was filled with inferiority…always saying, '*oh, I'm just a child…I can't do anything.*' When God meets Jeremiah in the chapter one of Jeremiah, God says, '*Stop trembling'*…and when He shows up to Isaiah, He says, '*start trembling.*' But…in both cases He showed up!! My old friend Jack Miler used to say what he loved about Isaiah 6 was,

*You know…here's Isaiah like the rest of us…going into the service of worship…and the reason he's so shocked is the last person he actually thought he would meet …was God. '**Who would ever have thought that I'd actually meet God in a worship service***?'

You expect to meet your friends, and all sorts of other people. God was a concept until that moment, and when He showed up as a reality, He began to re-arrange everything in Isaiah's life. Has that happened to you? Is God contradicting you? Is He changing you? Has He completely demolished and reengineered your agenda and the way in which you look at life? Has that happened? **If you're out of touch with the reality of**

God…you're out of touch with reality.

Self-Quake

So…here's God…who's a "*quake-er*." You didn't know He was a *quake-er* did you? You thought He was a Baptist or a Presbyterian. So…here's the God who comes in with this quake. So, the question is…how do you know that you've had God move…from being a concept to being a reality? There has to be a self-quake…you know that the God of reality has come into your life…and He's no longer just a concept…only when there's been a self-quake. What is this self-quake? We read about it in verses 5-8…and it's classic. Here's how you know…here's how *you can know*, that God has become a reality in your life. What Isaiah experienced was an experience of (**1**) **radical beauty**, (**2**) an experience of **radical humility**, and (**3**) an experience of **radical purity**.

`Radical beauty. Isaiah heard the seraphim call out, "*Holy, holy, holy*." In Hebrew, often, magnitude is conveyed through the doubling and the repetition of a word. You usually don't see that in the English. For example, in Genesis 14 there's a text which says "they fell into very, very big pits." But in Hebrew it literally says, they fell into "pit pits." They didn't just fall into pits…they fell into really "pit-y pits." In 2 Kings 25:15, the text describes something that was of the purest gold (in the English translation)…but in Hebrew it actually says "*it was made of* ***gold gold***." Not just gold…gold gold!! The goldest gold you'd ever seen. The most pure…the most exquisite gold ever. So often, <u>magnitude is communicated by doubling</u>…**but nowhere else in the Bible, but here, in Hebrew, is any quality trebled**. That's how important this is. God isn't just "holy holy." He's **holy, holy, holy**!! There's a category beyond categories here. He's Holy…Holy…Holy!!

What is holy? Hebrew scholars say, the Hebrew word ***kadosh***, means on the one hand, superlativeness…infinitely unique superlativeness. To say that God's wisdom is holy wisdom is to say it's *infinitely beyond and better than anyone else's*. To say that God's love is "holy love" is to say that His love is *infinitely beyond and better than anyone else's*. So, first it means **infinitely unique superlativeness**. However, holiness also means brilliance and beauty. And that's what you find when we look at verse 2 and the seraphim…look what are they're doing…the seraphim are not just saying, "holy, holy, holy,"…they are constantly singing…Isaiah, says, "the sound of their voices…"…they were calling (it's a present progressive verb tense)…they "are" constantly singing *the praises of God's holiness to one another*. They're fascinated with His holiness…they love His holiness. They can't get enough of His holiness. They're constantly adoring His holiness.

The Bible sometimes talks about this by saying *they are worshipping God in the beauty of holiness*. What does that mean? Here's an illustration: imagine that you have some family money…and someone comes along and says, '*I'd like to marry you*.' So, you get married. But imagine, not long after the marriage at some point, your spouse comes to realize that he or she can't really get his or hands on your money…on that family money…and they leave you. You feel violated and used. You were only a means to an end. An object?! You feel like you were not loved for who you are in yourself. **Almost all of us relate to God like that**. How do you think God feels? What you mean, you say!? You know…I've talked to umpteen people…and you've talked to umpteen people who over the years have said:

O*h, I used to believe in God…*or *I used to go to church…I used to try to serve God…but He did not come through for me…you know, He didn't let*

this happen…or that happen…or something happened that shouldn't have, and I just don't know why He let my life go like that…and I asked for this and He let me down…in other words, I know He has this incredible 'blessing bank' account somewhere…I know it's there…but He'd never let me get my hands on it…and I was really after blessing… not God… the blessings of God are what I really wanted…but I wasn't going to get the blessings…so I was outta there!!

You *married* God for His money. He was an object. **In contrast**, the seraphim are adoring and serving God not on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis…not because God pays off in terms power, approval, comfort, control, significance and security…they are serving Him just because it's His due…just because of who He is…just because of the beauty of who He is. For the seraphim, **God's holiness is not useful; it's beautiful**. For example, we all love certain music…music that thrills us…that just *sends* us. And you put your headphones on…you listen to it and it just thrills you. Why do that? What good are you getting out of it? Does it make money for you…does it bring approval…does it help you move your career ahead? You say, 'oh, no, no, no.' Then, what good is it? You say, '*What do you mean, "what good is it?" It's good in itself…it's satisfying in itself. It's not useful; it is beautiful.*' Well…that's how God should be…if you knew who He was!! Someone will always say, '*Now, wait a minute! How in the world can someone find holiness, the unique, infinite otherness of God…the superlativeness of God…beautiful…attractive…in Himself*?'

Jonathan Edwards points out…and this is a series of powerful observations…first, that the power of God is something that you could get excited about selfishly…because it's of benefit to you, '*oh, I've got a powerful God.*' The wisdom of God is something you can get excited about selfishly because it could be a benefit to you, '*oh, I've got a God*

who's wise and He's going to give me guidance.' You can even get excited about the mercy of God…selfishly because it can be of benefit to you, '*oh, I'm going to get rid of my guilt-riddenness*.' But Edwards says, ***holiness if of no use at all…God's holiness if of no benefit to you…it's nothing but a threat***. Anyone who worships God's holiness and adores God's holiness is loving Him just for who He is in Himself…because it's of no benefit to you. So the question arises, '*how in the world could you possibly get to that place…that you see the beauty of His holiness? How do you get to that place…especially when you think of what His holiness is…His holiness is superlative…His holiness is the fact that you cannot beat God because His power is HOLY POWER…or Omni-power*.' And you can't question God, because His wisdom is HOLY WISDOM…and you can't escape God because He's omnipresent…HOLY PRESENCE!! So, His holiness is nothing but a threat to you. So, how could it be beautiful?

Radical humility. Isaiah has an experience not just of radical beauty but of radical humility. He says in verse 5, "**Woe to me**!" (And by the way, when a prophet says, 'woe to me,'…woe is a curse…woe is a malediction…and he's pronouncing a curse on himself. He's saying, I don't deserve to live.) And then he says, "*I am ruined! I am undone!* (I'm dismantled.) *For I am a man of unclean lips and I live amongst a people of unclean lips*." What is happening here? In the presence of human superlativeness you always find it traumatic…because it crushes your self-image. So, for example, you move to New York City …and you're the best singer in your little town…and you came to New York because you were going to have a career in singing…and you go to multiple auditions…and listening to other people…and through the door you hear voices that are inaccessibly better than you. And you're crushed…because of what?…the realization of your mediocrity…you're dismantled…'*woe is me*,' says the male or female singer, '*I'm a woman or man of unclean lips*'…just in the

presence of human superlativeness.

You think you're pretty. You think you're fast. You think you're smart… and then you move to New York …"idiot"…(laughter). And there are hundreds and thousands of people who are so much better than you are… New York on a much smaller scale is like "*moving into the presence of the 'holy*.'" And you're constantly being traumatized by it…and you're constantly being reminded that '*I'm average…I'm not that good*.' Now, what happened to Isaiah? Here's what we know from tradition. Isaiah was of the royal family. Tradition tells us that his father was the brother of the king. Therefore, he was one of the elites. And from his "book" we know ***he was a man of artistic, intellectual, and communicative genius***. (And you know for sure, if you wrote a book and 3,000 years later people were still sitting around and studying it… you'd know that you were pretty smart.) But, it was an oral culture, and even though he said that "he was a man of 'unclean lips'"…in his culture he was considered to have the proverbial "golden tongue." That was real power in an oral culture. He wrote this passage during a time of cultural upheaval…the year King Uzziah died.

King Uzziah had been in seclusion for years…he had leprosy…and everything was falling apart. The culture was falling apart…society was falling apart…things were in very bad shape. And, don't you suppose a man like Isaiah…who was likely the most brilliant young man of his generation, and of the royal family, and one of the elites…would say, '*boy, I can't wait…I know what's wrong with this country…when I get into power, then I'm really going to be able to make things straight*.' Whenever there are things are going wrong…and there are always things going wrong…you always think '*those people over there are the problem*.' Young people think it's '*those fuddy-duddies who don't understand, how*

things should be done now.' Management says it's union, and union says it's management…and Democrats, 'it's the Republicans'…Republicans, 'it's the Democrats.' Everybody thinks '***they** are the unclean ones… they're the ones that are the problem*.' Then…Isaiah gets in the presence of the holiness of God, and he realizes that ***he's the problem***. Isaiah realizes, "all of my people are unclean and I'm just one of them. Even my lips…the best part of me…are unclean flawed…wrong…selfish… distorted…twisted.

Every single place in the Bible that a human being changes his thinking from *God as a concept* **to** *God as a reality*…every single place in the Bible where people actually begin to move into the presence of the reality of God…**they start to hate themselves**. Job said, "*I heard of You with my ear, but I see you now with my eyes, and I repent in dust and ashes*." Isaiah says, "*woe is me…I'm undone*." Peter says to Jesus, "*depart from me Lord, I'm a sinful man*." Over and over…and many New Yorkers I know say, '*Now wait a minute. This sounds like low self-esteem…and I believe in a God of love*.' Please think with me for a minute – please think for a second – let's just use common sense. Let's just say there's a God who is nothing but love…nothing but love…no holiness…no justice…no wrath…nothing but love. Listen, if even in the presence of human superlativeness, your self-image comes crashing down around your ears, then even if you got in the presence of a God who is nothing but pure love, you would hate yourself…you say, '***Oh, I hate myself…I'm so cruel. I'm so unloving…I used to think I loved people…but I never really loved anybody***.'

Think about it!! If in the presence of human superlativeness, your self-image comes crashing down around your ears, how could it be different with God…how could it be otherwise with Him? Here's how you know

that you've begun to be in the presence of the real God…that you've begun to have God become a reality in your life…you'd think you're a sinner, you'd think you're lost. you'd see you're more capable of cruelty…more capable of evil…more selfish…more petty…more small-minded…more impatient that you ever thought you were. You know you're a sinner and you need to be rescued by grace. And if you say, '*oh, that's so negative*' … come on, I just said, if there's a real God you'd have to feel like that. How could it be otherwise. It couldn't be otherwise. If you say, '*I just don't believe that people should feel sinful*,' **then you haven't been near the real God**. It's not just what the Bible says…it's common sense.

Radical beauty. But, that's not all that happens to Isaiah. Don't listen to people who say, '*oh, this would lead to low self-esteem*.' Think: people with low self-esteem who actually get in the presence of the real God, realize that their **low self-esteem was to a great degree, self-absorption**. And the only way they are going to get out of their low self-esteem is something that "*gets them out of themselves*"…and they start thinking about something bigger than themselves. And here's how Isaiah…who was crushed for a few seconds to the lowest self-esteem you could ever want to experience…got out of himself. As soon as Isaiah confessed his sin…as soon as he admitted the reality of his sin (verse 5)… *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty"*…the minute he confessed his sin…God began to explode into his life…the angel flew to him…but, when Isaiah saw the angel coming toward him, the angel had "the fire of God in his hand"… and you know what Isaiah would have thought? Here's what he would have thought. Every single place in the Old Testament, **the fire of God represents judgment**…**it represents wrath**. It never represents cleansing or purification. Never!! There are many places in the Bible…for

example, look at Numbers 11 [14]…when the unholy came into the presence of the Holy…out from the temple came what?…FIRE!! It consumed them. But here, Isaiah is shocked to realize…despite all his high self-esteem…in the presence of the superlativeness of God…**he sees that he's the problem**…he's part of the problem of the human race… his pride…his cruelty…he sees it for the sin that it is…but the minute he confesses that…here comes the fire of God (I know he thought he was a goner!!)…and he deserved it…he expected that he was about to wiped out. And look…the fire of God…even the angel couldn't pick it up with his hand, he had to use tongs.

But when the fire got to Isaiah's mouth…think about this…it goes to his lips, the point which he confessed (it must have stung)…but almost immediately, instead of consuming him, he realized he'd been cleaned. ***It was a word of pardon***: "*Your guilt is taken away and your sins atoned for*." And, in the very next verse Isaiah said, "*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us*?'" Do you realize what God was saying…**one second** after Isaiah realized he didn't deserve to live…and that ***he was more wicked and flawed than he ever dared believe…(*SUDDENDLY*) he was more affirmed, valued, and wanted than he ever dared hope***. Because, in essence, God tells Isaiah that '*He's got a little business going…"I'm saving the world…and I need a new partner*.'" And then God tells him, '*and, oh, by the way…this job I want you to do…it's going to be horrible because, all of your life you're going to be unsuccessful. You're going to preach and preach and preach and nobody's going to listen to you…EVER. You're going to be totally frustrated…you're going to be absolutely ineffective…no one is going to listen to you…they will persecute you the rest of your life*.'

Yet, Isaiah responds, “Here I am. Send me.” **What happened to Isaiah**? Here’s what happened to Isaiah…his self-image had been deconstructed and reconstructed on the spot. We say this a lot, but here’s the perfect example: At the same moment *he realized that he was more wicked than he ever dared believe…he suddenly realized he was also more loved and affirmed than he ever dared hope…through the grace of God*. What this meant was…before, he thought he was good because he lived up to his standards. See, everyone who has not experienced the grace of God is earning their self-worth through some kind of performance standards. ‘*If I’m like this, then I feel good about myself. If I do this…if I live like this…*’ But, you know what that means! If you’re living up to your standards, then you’re bold…and confident…***but not humble…you’re arrogant***. But…if you’re not living up to your standards, then you are humble…and kind of sensitive to other people… but you’re not bold nor confident. In the grace of God, you are both bold and humble at the same time…because you’re more wicked than you ever dared believe, you’re more loved than you ever dared hope…at the same time. This perspective gives you ***a new psychological ballast and stability***. **Nothing** can move you…nothing, ironically, can shake you. Nothing can shake you! Why?? When you fail, you remember the affirmation of God which is there by grace, not by performance. And, when you succeed, you’re not puffed up because you remember *you’re nothing but a sinner saved by grace*. You’re bold and humble at the same time. That’s why you can take on anything. You can handle anything. To the degree that God is a reality in your life…you know how that works… and when He starts to slide back into being a concept…you’ve got to go back and make sure that He’s a reality…and then you can handle anything.

Now…how’s that possible? How can the fire of God be an agent for

cleansing? How's that possible? Do you realize that centuries later… almost the same thing happened…you know, the temple was shaken. There was an earthquake because God came down. And do you realize that the temple was so shaken…the door posts were so shaken…the threshold was so shaken, that the veil ripped? Do you know when that happened? Matthew 27:45-46 "*From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ""Eloi, Eloi," "lama" "sabachthani?""--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice…at that moment…the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth shook and the rocks split. What was happening? Before Jesus died on the Cross…you remember in the garden He said, "*My soul is sorrowful, even unto death*."

What was He saying? Wasn't He in essence saying, '*Woe is Me…I am undone…I am ruined…I feel like I'm coming apart*.' But no angel showed up and said, '*thy sin is atoned for…*' because ***Jesus was the sacrifice on the altar***. ***Jesus Christ was shaken by the judgment of God***…Jesus Christ is the judge of the world, who…the first time He came to the earth, came not to bring judgment, but to bear judgment! He was shaken into the depths so you and I can be unshakeable, so that our sin can be atoned for. So that we could get the '**new self-image**' <u>that comes from the self-quake of having the glory of God come down into our lives</u>. Oh my gosh, then…then…if it's really true…that we're completely accepted in Him…not on the basis of our performance…**now the holiness of God is beautiful**. You don't serve God to get things. You've already got everything. Well, then why serve God? Because of the beauty of who He is…because of who He is and what He's done. You want to know Him because you want to resemble Him…because you want to delight Him…because you want to be part of this new business of His…in

saving the world.

World Quake

If God comes into your life and creates a self-quake, you're sent out to be part of the movement of God that is eventually going to shake the earth…heaven and earth (and we talked about that in Hebrews 12) because He's going to create a new heaven and earth. **IF**…you're to become a ***cooperative agent***, a man or woman in mission…there are at least three things that come as a result of the self-quake that make you useful. Instead of using Him, you let Him use you.

Availability. "Here am I"…*whatever* (v. 8). You know what happened there. God had become more real than Isaiah's perceived needs… more real than your needs. In July, 1970, at a Christian camp in Colorado , a woman Bible teacher (who lives in Summit , New Jersey still) gave an illustration that changed my life. She said:

* If the distance between the earth and the sun (92,000,000 miles) were the thickness of a sheet of paper…

* Then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a stack of paper 70 feet high…

* And the diameter of our galaxy would be a stack of paper 310 miles high…

* …that's how big our galaxy is, and it's just a speck of dust, virtually in the whole universe

…and the Bible tells us Jesus Christ holds this universe together with the word of His power. [15] The word of His power, '*His pinkie, as it were*,'

she said. Then she asked us this question: "*Is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your assistant*?" Then she said, "*Now, I want you all to get up and walk around for one hour in silence…no one speaking… and think about the implications of what I just said for your life*." I remember very, very clearly that I realized that up until that point, I had wanted God to be available to me; but, I began, during that talk obviously, to sense God's reality…I began to experience His glory. Was it a vision…NO? He stopped being a concept and became a reality; and I realized that no matter what He said…no matter what He did…no matter what He let come into my life, because of who He was, I needed to be unconditionally available to Him. PERIOD!! Have I lived up to that… unconditionally available…have I lived up to that? Absolutely not! But, guess what…***when God becomes real…when that gets into your heart as an irreducible, unavoidable, inescapable, permanent principle that you'll never be able to escape.***

Dependability. Now, here's what I find most interesting. God tells Isaiah He has a job for him. "*Here am I, send me*!" But God says '*wait, I haven't given you the job description*.' Did you notice that? Then God goes on and says, '*I want you to realize that these people are going to be so obstinate…you're going to preach to them for years, and every time they're going to say, "I don't want to hear this…I don't want to hear this…*'" God says '*it's going to get so bad that at one point you're going to have to say to them what Romans 1 says* (poetic justice) '*God's going to give you what you want*.'" The worst thing that God could ever give anybody is what their unregenerate heart wants… ("I don't want to hear this…I don't want to hear this…")…God continues: '*and at some point you're going to say to everybody in Israel, ok, then you're not going to be able to hear it…God's going to give you what you want*.' It's that bad. They literally will not be able to hear Him.

But, after God give Isaiah the job description…does Isaiah take the job? Well, the rest of the book says, yes, of course. Now what this means is that Isaiah is dependable. His needs are not as important as God…and so he doesn't work his ministry around his needs and whether there's fulfillment as an individual…there is no individual fulfillment here. Why don't we all do that? When you volunteer for something, why not *working your volunteering around your travel plans*…rather *work your travel plans around your volunteering*? When you give a pledge or you give money, instead of just giving what you're not going to miss anyway… not going to make much difference anyway…in the way you live your life…why not be so generous that it actually changes the way you live? That in your generous giving to charity and ministry you can't live just the way you want to live. Why not take the jobs around the church that get almost 'no applause'…like sitting with the children during a service…or passing out bulletins, for which you'll receive no applause. ***Why not get taken out of yourself and what's fulfilling to you…because the glory of God is in your life?***

Expectancy. This passage does not end bleakly. There is a seed in the stump. THERE'S A SEED IN THE STUMP!! God is saying,

Isaiah, for the rest of your whole life…it's going to be just terrible… spiritually, economically, and politically, it's going to be one disaster after another…you're never going to see it get any better; in other words, your nation is going to be like a 'grove of trees cut down'…but, there's a seed in the stump. ***I will*** *bring about a new heavens and earth.*

See, if God is your reality, then you'll always work no matter how it looks around you, in the hope and the knowledge that eventually ***everything sad will come untrue***.[xxxix] Everything sad IS going to come untrue. So, with that availability, with that dependability, and with that

expectancy, say to God: “Here I am. Send me!” Give yourself…not just your money.

READING 12 – The Gospel, the Church, and the World

1 Peter 2: 4-12; 21-25

4 As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion , a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, " 8 and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message--which is also what they were destined for. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 23 When they hurled their

insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

We're next going to look at one more very important text…that has to do with our Vision…what we're doing here in our city. The importance of this text to me goes back to my college years, because, when I first became a Christian, I thought the Church was obsolete. I saw it as actually a kind of embarrassment. I didn't like the Institutional Church at all. It didn't seem very important to my own particular Christian experience and practice. Then I went to a conference, and the Bible teacher spent the entire weekend teaching on 1 Peter 2:9…"*you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God"* and that forever changed my understanding of the Church…***forever***. This passage teaches (**1**) what the Church is, (**2**) the remarkable tension we're supposed to maintain between the church and the world around us, and (**3**) then how to get the power to maintain that tension. It's important to understand that the Bible calls us to "maintain this tension" between the Church and the world. It's a great temptation to attempt resolve this tension, rather than maintain it.

What is the Church?

It's very important to see in verse 5 that we are called, (you), *like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house*. The word translated "spiritual house" means a temple of the Holy Spirit. The shekinah glory of God inhabits the church, and we are the 'living stones'…having come to **Jesus…THE living stone**…we become living stones and God's

presence comes down and inhabits us. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says "You are a temple of the Holy Spirit." That's the only place where we are addressed individually. Almost every other place, where the Bible says '*you're a temple of the Holy Spirit*,' it's speaking collectively …Peter… Paul…everyplace. When it says you're a temple of the Holy Spirit, it's saying, '*we are stones…and we're built together*.' Notice it's a present tense…'*you also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house*.' "Being built" is a present progressive.

Think about this…every brick or stone in a wall has all kinds of stones above it that are heavily dependent on it. So that if a stone in a particular place shakes…everything else shakes. If it comes out, everything falls. Then, below ***the stone***…right below ***the brick***…you've got many stones or bricks that you, the brick, are dependent upon. If they shake, you shake…if they pull out, you fall down. Yet, most Christians right now in America just come to church to get the teaching…maybe even go to a class. The question though is, *Are* ***you (***reader***)*** *so built into the lives of a body of believers that if you stop coming, things would collapse?* Do you relate to any believers like that? Interdependent means that you share decisions together, you share private struggles, you share emotions, your share money, you share homes…and practical help…you share everything. Peter is saying here, '*to the degree that you are being built together, into interlocking interdependence, that is what God inhabits. That is how the power of the Holy Spirit and the reality of God increasingly come into your life*.' It's as you're built together. Not just simply you, as an individual…you know…having your quiet time. *You can't expect God to work in your life if you are not built into a particular body of believers*. You might ask, '*why would that be the case*?'

Nobody gets this across better than that famous passage in C. S. Lewis'

The Four Loves [xl]in his chapter on friendship. He talks about the fact that he was part of a circle of friends who were very, very close to each other and then one of them died. His name was Charles. It was then that Lewis found something very interesting after Charles died. He said:

"In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself, I am not large enough to call any person completely into activity. I want other lights than my own to show all the facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald…far from having him to myself, now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald."

Do you understand what he's saying? In other words, '*now that Charles is gone, it's not like I've got more of Ronald, but rather I've lost the part of Ronald that only Charles could bring out*.' Lewis continues:

"In this, ***friendship exhibits a glorious 'nearness by resemblance'*** *to Heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each has of God. For every soul in heaven, seeing Him in her own way, communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' to one another.*

Isn't that amazing?! What Lewis is pointing out is that it takes a group to know an individual…any one human being. You can't know *that individual* the way a group can know *that individual*. **Only a group brings out the whole person**. If that is true of a human being, how much more must that be true of God? You can't really know God by yourself. You can't know God unless you are in *deep community*. You can

only know a little piece of God by yourself. And the part that you see, as it were, is a part that you're holding back from other people…who need what you have. And you need what they have. Eighty-one percent of Americans say, '***oh**, you can live a flourishing Christian life without going to church at all*.' All I can say is, **that belief must be based on a view of God made up, out of your head**…because the real God does not act like that. The real God inhabits us collectively. The Spirit…the shekinah glory comes down in us as we are being built together. That's the church!! You must realize that **the Church is an intensely communal community**. If that's the case, then all communities have ***this issue***, and that is, '*how do you relate to the people 'outside*?' How do you relate to the people who are not in the community? How do you relate to people on the '*other side of the boundary*?' …which brings us to our second point!

The Deep Tension That Must Be Maintained Between the Church and the World

In this passage, Peter shows us that there is a DEEP TENSION that must be maintained between the church and '*the world around*' it. Before looking at the passage, let me remind you that sociologists, anthropologists, and historians for many years have pointed out that religions *tend to relate to the world around them* in one of two ways (and every thinker and scholar has different names for them) but I'm going to use: the **sectarian religious group** and the **chaplaincy religious group**.

The sectarian religious group sees itself as being very separate from the surrounding society. <u>The society around is THEM</u>!!. The chaplaincy religious group tends to be more mainstream religious groups…and inclusive…<u>the surrounding society is US</u>!! The sectarian groups are

incredibly exclusive when it comes to beliefs…they have high walls and bars limiting access…you have to belief "this," and "this" and "this." Mainstream chaplaincy types of religious groups have almost no doctrinal requirements at all. They say, '*if you just live in the village…or if you live in the town…or if you live here, just come, 'you don't have to believe anything. We're totally inclusive.*'" Mainstreams groups constantly talk about being so inclusive, '*we have everybody, oh, we love everybody, everybody can come in, it doesn't matter what you believe.*'

So, you have mainstream kinds of religious groups and you have fundamentalist kinds of religious groups. The sectarian groups… SOCIETY IS ***THEM***. The mainstream chaplaincy groups…SOCIETY IS ***US*** . But the differences, largely, interestingly, as different as they seem to be ,,,and let's face it, most religious groups that we know today, fall into one of those categories or the other…but what's interesting…what they have in common…***they're both are about power***. One of the ways you can get power in a society is by completely reflecting the cultural values of the elite. So, if you want to be completely accepted, by the cultural elites, you just adopt their values…you assimilate…and then you can get into the 'higher echelons' and you're not seen as sectarian… not seen as a fundamentalist…you can be on the 'Boards'…you can have big endowment funds…you can have your big beautiful buildings in the center of town. That's how you get power…by completing giving in, adopting the values of the cultural elite, and assimilating. But, he sectarian approach…the fundamentalist approach is also about power… because *you can get power by vilifying the world*…by keeping '*your people*' in line…by telling them how '*different we are.*' Sending out incredible fund raising letters!! Talking constantly about how bad the world is…and WE ALONE stand for the truth. And, interestingly enough, the sectarian approach avoids suffering, because '*we stay away from that*

bad world' and we attack it.' The mainstream approach to avoid suffering…*'we give in, we're just like everybody else.*'

So what does the Bible say the Church is supposed to be like? Are we supposed to be a sectarian group or be like a chaplaincy group…a fundamentalist group…a mainstream group? No. Neither. Here's what we're told, in verses 11 and 12: *Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* Look at this **astounding balance***:* First of all, the words "aliens and strangers in the world." The first thing we're told is that we're not to assimilate…you're not just like the surrounding culture (you are aliens). This word means 'foreigners.' This is a Greek word that meant foreigners. Peter is writing to Greeks…in Greek cities… and Romans in Roman cities…people who are the same race as everyone around them…people whose families had lived in their communities for generations…yet Peter is saying: '***when you become a Christian, you become a foreigner***.' No matter who you are, you become an alien.

Suetonius, one of the early pagan writers [xli], actually said about Christians that they were actually another '***genus***.' He used the Greek word *genus*…which is a word for species…that Christians were a different species of human. Now, why would he say that? He said it because Christians didn't keep their Christianity private, it shaped the way in which they lived culturally. They were a chosen race…they were a holy nation…holy means separate…they became a counterculture. Why? Well, here's what we know about the early Christians. Here are some of the things that they practiced:

* They didn't go to the blood-thirsty entertainment, the gladiatorial fests…and therefore they were considered anti-social

* They did not serve in the military in order to support Caesar's wars of conquest

* They were against abortion and infanticide [16]

* They empowered women, allowing women in positions of leadership that were very different from the rest of society

* They were against sex outside marriage – that was weird

* They were against same sex practices – that was weird

* They were absolutely radically for the poor – they gave way beyond that of what the Greeks and Romans gave

* They mixed the races and classes together in their gatherings that were considered scandalous

* They believed that Christ was the only way to salvation

The Greeks were pagans. The Romans were pagans. And they believed that everybody has their own god…everyone has their own religion. There's that god…and there's that god…they were polytheists…they were pluralistic. And along comes Christianity and its adherents say, '*No, Jesus is the only way to salvation*.' No one had ever seen a group of people that held to all those practices. They were aliens. They weren't like the Greeks…they weren't like the Romans…they weren't like the Jews…they were aliens. You say, 'well, that was then.' Think about this…what if there was a group of people today that followed the same set of Biblical values? …rejecting bloodthirsty sports and militarism, empowering women,

reveling in the combination of races and classes, radically serving the poor. What kind of group is that? Sounds liberal!! … forbidding abortion, forbidding sex outside of marriage, forbidding same sex practices, insisting that Jesus is the only way of salvation. What's that sound like? Sounds like a horribly conservative group. ***Guess what? We're still aliens***. We do not fit into Western relativistic individualism…we don't fit into traditional hierarchical legalism…we don't fit. We don't fit liberal… we don't fit conservative. We've always been aliens. There's never been a cultural fit! Whenever Christians pick up the values of the Gospel and begin living them out, they're aliens. We're foreigners!

But…on the other hand, ***we're resident aliens….we're unalienated aliens***. Because of those two words in verse 11…'dear friends, I urge you as *aliens and strangers*…' in the Greek it had a very technical meaning that translates "resident aliens." They were not tourists…not visitors…not people who had come for a couple of years and made money and then went home. These were people who had come permanently, who though they were foreigners…they were different…they had different backgrounds and languages…perhaps different culturally, but they were permanent residents, committed to their new country. And this balance comes out particularly in verse 12, and it's an amazing balance. It shows that *we're* ***not called to assimilate*** *to* ***or to attack*** *the culture* around us. We're not called to be either mainstream or sectarian. "*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.*"

Now, this is very much like what Jesus said, when He said, "*you are a city on a hill…you are the light of the world… let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in*

heaven," (Mt 5:14-16). The word "*good deeds*," ordinarily in the New Testament doesn't just mean moral behavior. It means doing good…it means serving. Here is the remarkable thing that Peter is calling the Church to. If you assimilate, you don't suffer…AND, everybody thinks you are fine. If you attack and withdraw, you don't suffer…AND, everybody thinks you are weird. What if you are really different? You do not assimilate…you maintain your Biblical values, and yet you engage and you serve and you come close and you love your neighbors and you give yourself to your new country and you give yourself to your new city. Then what?

Peter is saying here, interestingly enough…it does not say that the community of faith is good and the world out there is bad…Peter is saying (and this is amazing) '**that the world will reject you *<u>and</u>* recognize you**.' It says they will accuse you of wrongdoing…they will vilify you… they will misunderstand you…they have to…because the inner logic of their worldview is different from the inner logic of your worldview. Yet Peter is saying, there will always be some overlap. They will vilify you and recognize you. The implication of this is that every single culture (assuming Peter is right…*of course he's right*)…every single culture has some common grace in it. Every culture is made of people in the image of God…every culture is made of people with wisdom and insight; therefore, every single culture…every non-believing non-Christian culture, in some place, will have some overlap with Biblical values. They will see it…they will vilify us for many of the ways in which we contradict it, BUT, on the other hand, they will recognize some beauty in places where what Christians are *doing overlaps*, and in some cases, goes beyond what that culture values.

Let me give you one example, in two cases: Here's what the Bible says

about sex, family, and gender. And, here's what the Bible says about 'turn the other cheek and love your enemy…if your enemy hungers, feed him… forgive seventy times seven…never stop forgiving, no matter how much people will abuse you. Both Eastern and traditional cultures like what the Bible says about sex and family, but talk to them about '*turn the other cheek and loving your enemies…and seventy time seven*,' they say, "THAT'S PREPOSTEROUS!! We believe in 'an eye for an eye." Come to New York City …Western individualistic culture…and talk about those same two things…what are they going to say? They're going to love all that talk about forgiveness and reconciliation…they think that's wonderful; but sex, gender, and family…HOW REGRESSIVE!! Every culture will both vilify and recognize us…*in different ways*. Every culture will do it **IF**, we're unalienated aliens—we're aliens…we are not assimilated, but we're loving aliens, we're loving them…we're not alienated aliens…we're serving them. We come in close enough…don't you realize the mainstream because they assimilate, doesn't suffer…and the sectarian is attacking and they don't suffer…but we will. That's the whole point of the book of First Peter. *You're going to be accused of wrong doing…so be gentle…be gracious…expect it…don't freak out… don't say "how can people do this to us?" That's the way it is…and that's how you're bearing witness. In a non-defensive way,* ***be different: serve****. We're neither assimilating or withdrawing and hostile.*

How To Maintain the Tension/ Where To Get the Power

Now, this IS an incredible vision…an INCREDIBLE VISION. And the question that comes up right off the bat is, '*how in the world can we do it*?" I want to be honest in saying that this is part of our vision here at Redeemer…and we're likely always slipping off to one side or the other, I'm sure, and so as almost every institution finds it very, very hard to walk

this line, the question comes, *where do we get the power to maintain this tension*? **Here's where we get the power to do it**: "*Come to Him…to the living stone…*" (v. 4). The way we're going to become '***the Church'*** is we have to come to the living stone… the cornerstone, to Jesus Christ. What does it mean to come to Jesus Christ? To come to Him means three things: (**1**) You have to admit you've already got a cornerstone (**2**) You've got to find Him precious and (**3**) then you must come to Him and line up and unite with Him…***the*** cornerstone.

- **Admit you already have a cornerstone.** In the second half of Verse 7 Peter says: *The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone*. What this is saying is that everybody's building. God is saying, here's the one you should build on…Jesus Christ. And the builders are rejecting it. Who are these builders. What it's saying is, everybody's building a life…and everybody's building a life on some kind of cornerstone. There's God's way to do it and there's our way to do it, but everybody's doing it. If you do not build your life on Jesus, you are building on something else. The cornerstone of a building was the thing on which everything rested. Martin Luther, in his preface to Galatians, made a great observation regarding the way you can find out what your cornerstone is…(the cornerstone is your foundation…the cornerstone of a building is the stone on which everything rested; if the cornerstone was unstable in any way, the whole building trembled). Luther said the way you know what your cornerstone is…is when the chips are down, '***what do you look to for your vindication***.' What he's saying, is when the chips are down, what do you say to yourself? How do you defend yourself? 'Well, I am a good parent…or, 'I 'm a moral person…or, 'I'm a spiritual person'.. or, you say, 'I'm a lawyer' …'I'm a doctor…'I've made it on Wall Street'… 'I've made it in New York .' What do you say to yourself? **You defend yourself…you've got to!!** You've got a cornerstone. I

remember talking some years ago to a college counselor at an Ivy League school. She said,

"*You know what's interesting? Everyone that comes to an Ivy League school made "A's" where they came from, but… somebody's going to get "B's"…somebody's going to get "C's"…and a lot of them show up on my couch.*" And I asked, "*why is that*?" She said, "*well, it's one thing to want good grades but it's another thing to basically build your identity on the idea, 'I'm smart.'*"

You see when the cornerstone shakes, the whole life shakes. Or athletes… they feel pretty good about themselves until they have to retire. Very often their lives fall apart. Why? When the cornerstone shakes…! It's great to want to be an athlete, but it's another thing to build your identity on it.

Remember the story I recounted in Reading 2…about the woman who essentially let men abuse her, because she just NEEDED men…she needed male affection. But then she got into heavy counseling and the counselor, well meaning, said "*you've got to get a career and be proud of the fact that 'you are a self-sufficient being who can make money… you've got your own career.*" But she came to realize what the counselor was saying was, "*don't make men your cornerstone, make success in business your cornerstone.*" But this woman suddenly realized that "*if a guy rejected me I fell apart; guys and male affection were my cornerstone. I don't want to shift to another cornerstone that is unstable…you know, like business success. Then everything hangs on whether I'm making money or not.*" That's the reason why Peter said, "*See, I lay a stone in Zion, a <u>chosen and precious cornerstone</u>, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame,*" (v. 6). **If you build your life on *any other cornerstone than* Jesus Christ, you will**

be put to shame. It will constantly happen. You'll feel like a failure. You'll be shaken to your roots. You'll feel like you don't have a 'self.' You have to build on ***the*** cornerstone. First, then, you have to recognize that you do have a cornerstone. Secondly, you can't just believe in Him, look at verse 7… *Now to you who believe, this stone is precious.* It's not enough to just believe with your head…it's not an issue of cognition…'*oh, I believe Jesus died on the Cross*'…He's got to become precious.

- **Find Jesus precious.** What does that mean? Imagine…what if I was a doctor and I came to you and I said, '*you're going to die in a week, unless you take this medicine.*' And you say, '*well, blech, give me that medicine.*' And I say, '*well, wait a minute, it's very expensive. In order to get it, you're probably going to have to sell your apartment and move into a trailer. You're probably going to have to sell your car and just walk everywhere. So…you may not want to buy it.*' And you'd likely say, '*what good is my apartment…as much as I love it…if I'm dead? What good is my car…as much as I love it, if I'm dead*?' Suddenly, you say, '*that medicine is so precious to me that all the other things that used to be valuable have become expendable.*' That, in a sense, is **what it means to say Jesus is precious**. *Until He's that precious to you… until He's that lovely to you…until He's that beautiful to you…that everything else becomes eternally and utterly expendable, He can't be your cornerstone.*

You ask, '*well, how in the world can he become like that to me*?' Well, it tell you right there in the passage, 'come to Him as the rejected one. See how and why He was rejected.' *He came to His own, but His own knew Him not.* Jesus was the ultimate alien. His family and friends rejected Him. At the end of His life His friends and disciples abandoned Him. Even His Father rejected Him. You know, there's nothing worse than

being rejected by the people that you love. It tears your heart out. So… He's the ultimate alien. He's rejected…**BUT**…***He's an unalienated alien***. In spite of the fact that He was rejected, He didn't assimilate and give in (didn't say, 'since you're beating Me up I'm going to change) on the other hand, He doesn't attack…He doesn't withdraw. He said, "*My life I lay down of My own accord…no man takes it from Me.*" **Why**? Why was He an alien…but an unalienated alien? Why was He rejected…yet He took the rejection? And He followed through to the end. Why did He do it? **Because YOU were precious to him**. Even His life was expendable to Him When you see that you were so precious to Him that He would die for you and pay the penalty for your sin, then He becomes precious to you…and when that happens, finally, you come to Him. What does it mean to come…to be a stone, and to come to the living stone?

- **Come to him and unite with Him.**The cornerstone was not just the foundation, the cornerstone had angles to it, and therefore you had to line up all the other stones…they had to be lined up with the cornerstone. If the cornerstone was *off*, all the other stones were *off*. If the cornerstone was *on*, all the other stones were *on*. If the cornerstone was *strong*, all the other stones were *strong*. If the cornerstone was *shaky*, all the other stones were *shaky*. And it comes out here…you're lost in ***your cornerstone***. If the cornerstone is living…you're living. If the cornerstone is honored…you're honored. If the cornerstone has nothing to be ashamed of, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Here's what it means to be a Christian: the moment you unite to God through Jesus Christ…***He lived the life I should have live…He died the death I should have died***…then you are absolutely accepted in Him…if He's accepted, you're accepted. If He's beautiful to the Father, you're beautiful to the Father. And that's the secret of all the relationships we've been talking about. If you're that affirmed deep down in your soul…if you know

you are loved like that…then you can go out into the church, and not look around and say, 'n*ow who, if I hang out with them, will make me feel good about myself*.' No, you go out there and say, '*Who needs somebody to hang out with*.' You go out **not looking to get affirmed but to be *affirming***. When you look at the world, in light of how Jesus Christ suffered for you, how Jesus Christ was the ultimate unalienated alien… you're so affirmed…that you can love those who misunderstand you because you've got Him (who cares)

…***who cares about whether or not you have the acclaim of the serfs when you have the love of the King***.

In 1 Peter 2:12…this living as unalienated aliens was very much *lived out in the Roman Empire* . It says that you will be vilified but also that you'll be recognized. And, it's exactly right. You know, the Christian view that Jesus was the only Savior was seen by the pagans to be incredibly narrow-minded. Horribly exclusive!! They assumed, therefore, that Christians would be lousy citizens. '*If you believe you have the truth, if you believe that Jesus is the only way to God…the only way to salvation…if you have exclusive views…you'll lead an exclusive life*.' They figured Christians would be bad for society. That's not what happened. ***Christians***, in spite of their supposed exclusive views <u>lived the most embracive lives</u>. They were far more life affirming than the pagans. They were far more loving and accepting. They reached out to the poor. How could that be?

I remember very clearly right after 9/11, my wife Cathy and I were reading about…what, maybe 20 articles in a row which said that '*religious fundamentalism always leads to terror. People who believe they have the truth…that's what leads to terror*.' I remember about the 20th time I was reading one of these articles and quoting it to Cathy,

suddenly she asked, '***have you ever seen an Amish terrorist?*** *They're fundamentalists, aren't they*?' Sure they are! And then Cathy said, '*you see it's not true to say "religious fundamentalism always leads to terrorism"…it depends upon what the fundamental is*.'

What if the fundamental of your religion…what if the very essence of your fundamental view of reality is: '*a man who, when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate, when He suffered He made no threats…instead He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly*.' We, also, are seen by the world as having exclusive views, because we think we have the truth. But, if the truth is a man dying for His enemies…not attacking nor assimilating…but instead serving the people around Him… coming in close enough for them to see the glory of what the Gospel is… and being willing to take the suffering graciously…so that people can see it…you're not going to be into terrorism…not only that, you're not even going to be into separatism…nor assimilation…***you're going to be the Church of Jesus Christ***.

READING 13 - Jesus at His Friend's Feast

John 2: 1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee . Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." 4 "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. 8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, 9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10 and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." 11 This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee . He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

This passage has had a huge impact on our church over these last 16 years. This is the story of Jesus at the wedding feast of Cana …and there's a certain 'oddness' about it. Reynolds Price of Duke University said, "*if you were inventing a biography of Jesus Christ* (that is, if you were just making up stories about Jesus to get across His power and His glory)… *who would invent the inaugural event of Jesus' career a miraculous*

solution to a mere social embarrassment?" In other words, here…Jesus is using all His great divine power for **a *catering disaster***. If you were making up a story…a story about His greatest and power you'd never make up a story like this. Which means, it's here because it happened. Why did it happen? Why did He do it? What does this mean? What was He teaching by it? In this passage, we learn (**1**) what Jesus came to offer, (**2**) how He provides it, and (**3**) how we can receive it.

What Jesus Came to Offer

There was a wedding, verse 1. You've heard, of course, that in ancient times, in more traditional cultures, weddings were even bigger deals than they are in our day. Weddings in those days lasted about seven days. **The key** to the wedding was **the wine.** The wine was what made the wedding a feast…a party. It was the groom's family's responsibility to make the wedding a great feast and to supply enough wine to last seven days. What we find here…in the beginning of story…(but we aren't told how or why)… the wine ran out early. But.. **it was a disaster**…even though I joked about it being a 'catering disaster.' In that context, it was a lot more serious…for this was a ***shame culture***. In a shame culture, the social expectations of the society were such that if the family didn't fulfill the social expectations, it was a great disaster for everyone. In a shame culture this was not a small thing.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, heard about it, and was evidently close to the family (perhaps a relative)…she found out about the catering disaster before anyone else, and she went to Jesus and told Him about the situation…and Jesus did do something about the situation. What does it teach us that Jesus did it, that is, fulfills the need and provides the wine? ***It is an extremely important question***…because <u>this is His inaugural ***sign***</u>. Verse 11 tells us that this is the first of His miraculous

signs by which He was revealing His glory. When you roll out a new magazine or you go public with a new business enterprise, you want to make sure every single word is carefully crafted to *convey the quintessence of what the enterprise is all about*. What does it mean that the first inaugural sign of Jesus Christ's mission, by which He is telling us who He is and what He came to do? He did not raise someone from the dead…He did not heal a sick person…He did not preach a sermon. He didn't call anyone into discipleship. What did He do? He produced 150 gallons of the best wine to keep a party going. And that's His *first sign*. What does that mean? How could that be His first *sign*?

If you and I do find that odd (*even though I've labeled this somewhat facetiously a catering disaster*), perhaps it means we don't understand what Jesus is really about…very well. This term "master of the banquet" (in verses 7 & 8), is a Greek word that literally means the *ruler of the table* or the *lord of the feast*. We don't have in our weddings today someone quite like this, unless it's a really, really big wedding. This person was essentially a master of ceremonies. His real job was to make the party a real party…the banquet a real banquet…to make it a great feast. But, the whole point of this passage is what…who makes this a great feast…who is it that supplies the wine in the end? Who is the true Lord of the feast? It's Jesus. Jesus Christ is saying by making wine His *calling card*, He is saying: '*I come…yes, to bring self-denial…yes, to bring rules and regulations…yes, to bring humbling…yes, to bring codes of conduct…yes I come to bring all that and my followers will experience all of that, but ultimately, what am I here to do…where am I driving the universe?*' (We saw this earlier in Isaiah 25…*in the last day… the Lord of hosts will make for His people a feast of the finest meats and wine well refined…and on this mountain He will swallow up death forever. And the LORD God will wipe away tears from all faces and your reproach*

and shame will be taken away forever, for the Lord God has spoken.) Jesus is saying '**I am the Lord of the feast**. I come to bring festival joy.

I remember some years ago, a pastor of a church of which I was a member…this pastor was talking about some people who had been nominated for officer, and at one point he said, '*I really love this man, but this man has not yet taken responsibility, for the fact that he doesn't have much joy in his life*.' And that sure sounded strange to me. What did he mean…responsibility? For joy??!! And yet Jesus is saying here, '***I come to bring you joy****! That's what I'm about…that's where I'm driving the whole universe…I'm driving the whole world to* ***there***.'

Why is it that the Bible over and over again uses sensory language to get across what God offers us? For example:

* Psalm 34 – Taste and see that the Lord is good.

* 1 Peter 2 – Now you have tasted that God is gracious

* Ephesians 1 – I want the eyes of your heart to be enlightened so that you may know His power in us

* Ephesians 3 – I want you to have power to grasp how long, and wide, and high, and deep is the love of Christ.

Look at that language. We know God is good, but His word is saying, '*I want you to* ***taste*** *that God is good. You know God is a God of grace, but I want you to taste His graciousness*.' We know God is powerful from Ephesians 1, but He wants us to ***see*** His power…not just know about His power. We know that He loves us, but He '*wants us to grasp…to feel His love*.' Paul says His love is spread abroad in our hearts, by His Holy Spirit [17].

Why all this sensory language? Christians are being called…in all of these passages to ***go beyond just believing*** into experience. The Bible says it is not enough to just know God is loving and to know God is powerful. You've gotta taste…you've gotta see…you've gotta grasp His love and power. The person who put this best is Jonathan Edwards in his very famous sermon "*The Divine and Supernatural Light*" ***[xlii]*** Edwards says,

"There is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious and having a sense on the heart of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and graciousness. So there is a difference between knowing that honey is sweet and having the taste or the sense of its sweetness."

A *sense venue* can only be understood in terms of itself…not in terms of another *sense venue*. For example, if a person born blind asks you, '*is blue like the taste of salt…is red like the sound of a trumpet*'…you're going to respond, '*not really*.' You're going to say that you can't really convey the reality…if you don't have eyes. You're never going to really grasp the full reality of color by having it described to you in a book, or in terms of another sense. You have to actually see the color if you're ever going to experience the reality of it. What Edwards is saying, and what the Bible is saying, is this: **it's one thing to say oh I know God loves me…but have you seen…have you tasted…has it been shed abroad in your heart**? Have you actually had the life shaping reality come upon you? You say, '*oh, when you say sense of the heart, you mean the feeling…you're talking about emotions*.' Oh, NO!! I'm talking about something much deeper than the emotions…not less than emotions…but much more. **The heart is the control center of the life**. It is where your deepest commitments and trusts are. It's the things that you cherish the most…that's what your ***heart*** is…and therefore, the things that have

captured the imagination…and control you… mind, will, and emotions. Therefore, if you say, '*oh, I know God loves me*,' yet you still live a life of shame and failure, you don't have a sense on the heart of His love for you…or you'd be living with confidence. Your life would be shaped from the inside out.

Or, if you say, '*oh, I know God is wise and powerful*,' yet you're always scared and anxious…you're always worried about this, and about that… you're worried about money…you're worried about your children… or…*'oh, I know God's wise…I know God's powerful*'…**YET**, you're not seeing His wisdom…then you're not really seeing His power and His wisdom as the massive majestic thing that overshadows all other threats, so that you actually live your life with boldness. Until that happens…until you taste…until you see…until you grasp His love…and His power…and His greatness…until you feast…until you feast on Him…you haven't gotten 'it.' Jesus says: "Behold I stand at the door and knock…if any man will open and come in to me, then I will eat with him," (Rev 3:20). Not just that *I'll visit with him*. What's all this sensory language about? Jesus is saying, '*I come to bring you festival joy…I come to bring you the experience of God's love and the experience of His reality…a reality* ***that so shapes you through joy*** *that you won't live like you used to live. That's what I bring. Take responsibility for it…'cause that's what I come to offer*.' That's what He offers…festival joy.

How He Provides It

How He provides it is seen in how He actually gives the wine. In verse 3, '*when the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to Him, they have no more wine*.' That's a very reasonable request. Mary certainly knew that it was a social and cultural disaster. She went to Jesus (even though she had yet to learn of the fullness of who He was…but she certainly had more of a

sense than anyone else that there was hidden power in Jesus…and she knew He was a loving man…she knew He had a certain power) and so she asked Him if He could do something about it…about the catering disaster. What was His response? Now, the NIV [18] as well as most other translations don't seem to want to get across to us the '*rudeness of Jesus at this moment*.' It says "*Dear woman*' (but that's not what He says…the word 'dear' is not in there…He doesn't say 'Mother'…He doesn't say 'Mom') He says, "WOMAN!" That's all He says. "WOMAN!" It's very brusque…emotionally brusque. '*Woman…why do you involve Me*?" … very sharp and very harsh…and clearly Jesus is troubled by something. What is it? "My time has not yet come." Now, what is going on here?

If you're young and you're single…like Jesus…(and by the way, Jesus was 30 and certainly people at that time and in that culture were asking constantly, 'why aren't you married yet?…all the time…constantly.) So, if you're young and you're single…and especially if you live in a traditional culture…(though you pretty much feel it anytime at any place)…and you go to a wedding…what are you probably thinking about? You're going to be thinking about your own wedding. When will it be? Will it ever be? Who will it be with? And of course that can happen…you're your mind's a million miles away as you're sitting there…at the wedding…thinking about another wedding. ***But, if Jesus is really thinking about His wedding…because of His self-consciousness…He would be much more profoundly stirred*** than you and I would be, and here's why.

All through the Old Testament…all through the Hebrew Scriptures, God tells us that He does not just want to relate to us as a King to subjects…or as a shepherd to sheep…or even as a father to children. He wants to have such a profoundly loving, close, and intimate relationship

with us…*He wants to relate to us as a husband to his wife*. Therefore, in an astonishing number of places…like Isaiah 62, Hosea 2, Ezekiel 16, and Jeremiah 2, **God calls Himself the bridegroom of His people**. With that understanding, do you realize the audacity of what Jesus said? There's another place in the Gospels in which people were coming to Jesus saying, '*hey look, your disciples don't fast…and they don't pray… and they don't do all the various sorts of* ***spiritual disciplines*** *that other disciples do*,' and Jesus says, 'No, No.' "*Do the friends of the bridegroom fast when He is still with them*?" **He calls Himself the Bridegroom**!! In John 3, the people came to John the Baptist and said, '*hey, you used to be the big prophet in town, and now everybody's going after Jesus…doesn't that bother you*? *Everybody's following Jesus… everybody's following Jesus*.' What's John's response? He says, '*of course…the bride is for the bridegroom. I'm just the best man*.' [19]

Jesus Christ was probably sitting at that wedding feast thinking about what John the writer tells us at the end of the Bible in Revelation chapter 21, where we read: "*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.* Jesus Christ is thinking about that great day in the future when His people, His bride, will fall into His arms…in unity and embrace. But…why is He troubled? Why does he say, "WOMAN," and why does He say, "My time has not yet come"? Certainly for many years when I read this I thought it meant…what you probably think it meant…*'it's not My time to do a miracle*.' '*Mom, it's not time to do a miracle*.' But, He immediately turns around and does it. And therefore, I don't think that's what He was saying. I don't think Jesus related to His Mother the same way you and I do our mothers. It's not, '*oh, Mom, no…oh, Mom, no! No, Mom, no…I'm*

not going to do it…well, alright!!' But there's no indication that that was how He was responding to her then…because, when He says, '*my time has not yet come*,' He actually uses the Greek term that literally means "***My hour*" has not yet come**.

Every single place in the book of John where Jesus uses the term "*hour*," He is referring to the hour of His death. Wait a minute, now! Now we suddenly realize it's not as much of a non sequitur as we've thought… though it *still looks pretty weird*. She comes up to Him and says, 'Jesus… they have no wine.' And Jesus says, '…but it's not My time to die yet.' Jesus is thinking of another wedding…and He's saying, '*Mom, the only way that I'm going to have wine at My wedding feast…the only way I'm going to be able to lift the cup of festal joy, and have my spouse fall into My arms at My wedding feast…is,* ***I'm going to have to die***. And if you think, '*that's not what He's thinking, that I'm reading it in'*…I want you to see…how much clearer could He be, when He goes ahead and does the miracle…He's thinking about another feast …another wedding, another kind of wine of which this wedding…and ***this wine is just the image***.

But when He turns, and starts to create the wine for this wedding feast, notice where He goes. John says, "*nearby stood six stone water jars'*…the kind used by Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from 20 to 30 gallons. And Jesus said, 'fill those jars with water.' Jesus deliberately chooses the jars that were used for ceremonial washing. '*What do you mean, ceremonial washing*?' When the Jews went into worship God, they would wash ceremonially with water. It was a symbol of the fact that they were sinful. And <u>they needed to be cleansed if God was going to embrace them ***in love***</u>. This is what Jesus Christ is saying: '*Mom, the only way that My people are going to fall into My arms, the*

only way I'm going to embrace them and love them, the only way I'm going be able to lift the cup of festival joy with them, is if I drink the cup of eternal justice ***for them***.' 'This,' He said on the night of the Last Supper…'This wine is my blood.' 'Let this cup pass from Me,' He said to the Father. What He was saying was, 't*he only way I'm going to have My spouse…My love…*' *…the only way we're ever going to fall into His arms and know the absolute unity of oneness with Him and know His love and know that joy…is if He, first of all sheds His blood.* He can only raise the cup of festival joy with us if He first drinks the cup of eternal justice… all by Himself. And that's what He's thinking about!

Do you know what this means? Do you know the implications of Jesus as the bridegroom? **Every single time God chooses an image for Himself, He is saying something about us**. For example, when He says, "I am the Shepherd"…He's saying, "you're stupid. You're sheep." I am the King. You're subjects. I am the bridegroom. You're My bride. What's He saying about us? One of the things most intriguing to me about wedding customs is that there are some wedding customs that, pretty much universal…one of them is that the bride is absolutely bedecked with colors, and with jewelry, and with the most beautiful garments, and with cosmetics…AND, the bridegroom is not allowed to see her until the last minute. The best man sees her…everyone else sees her…in various stages of becoming more and more beautiful…bit by bit by bit, but not the bridegroom. Why? So that when the bridegroom is standing at the altar, and around the corner the bride comes, everything that's happened on that day, is to create…A POWERFUL IMPACT…of beauty…on the bridegroom. The sense of her beauty, on his heart…when she starts down the aisle, he's ravished…he's delighted…she looks more beautiful than he's ever seen her look…he wants to throw himself at her feet…he wants to not only promise undying faithfulness…but perhaps

dying faithfulness…and he wants to give her the world…if he could.

How dare Jesus Christ call Himself the bridegroom…***how dare He use this metaphor***? He better mean it. And He does. He is saying, '*I'm that ravished with your beauty…I'm that delighted with you…*' and if He's that ravished with our beauty…and He's that delighted in us…and He loves us like that…**and He wants to give us the world…He will**. And that's the reason why we're told…**you become the spouse of Jesus Christ**…you're betrothed to Him, the minute you look at Him and you say, '*with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor You. I give myself to You.*' And on the wedding day…the last day…the day of the Great Feast…we will fall into His arms…on that day, the universe is consummated…not just our marriage. History IS consummated. ***Everything sad is going to come untrue***. The power of the loving union between us is going to transform the world and make it a new heavens and a new earth. That's what it means…and, *that is the wine*.

Are you living on bread and water? Jesus is my King! I need to obey Him. Jesus is my Shepherd…He takes care of me. Do you have the wine? **Do you believe** Scripture when it says, "*Be glad O daughter of Jerusalem…the Lord has taken away your punishment…He takes great delight in you…He quiets us with His love…He rejoices over you with singing*" (Zephaniah 3:14-17)? Do you taste that? Do you see that? **That**… by the power of the Holy Spirit, is what is being shed abroad in your heart. That's the feast. **The feast begins now**…IT BEGINS NOW…the wine begins to flow now; the joy begins to shape your life now. **Live in the reality of that!!** That's what He offers and how He provides it.

How We Can Receive It

There are many ways of applying this, but I would like to just ***apply***

what we've learned here to your prayer life. Your prayer life!! Let me give you five ways in which the knowledge of what Jesus came to offer and how He provides it should transform your prayer life.

- **Saving prayer.** Some of you have been attending church for weeks. It might be time for you to **cross '*the line*.**' Do you know what it means to become a Christian? We've got a beautiful picture of it here in verses 9 and 10. What do we see? What we see is, "*then the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine; he did not realize where it had come from; and then he called the bridegroom*' (of course the bridegroom's family were the ones who'd allowed the 'catering disaster')…he called the bridegroom and said, '*everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink* ' (this really happened…who would make up such a story?) …*'you have saved the best 'til now*.' Guess what!! Jesus does the work and the bridegroom gets all the credit. And that's what it means to be a Christian.

Don't you dare say: '*Oh, Lord, I would love to have a relationship with You. I've tried very hard and I've ticked off all the lists…the party's going fine…and I've really worked very hard…now would you please reward me for all of my hard work*.' **That's not how you become a Christian**. You have to say, "*I've absolutely blown it. I'M OUT!! I don't just have to be 'topped off here'…now that I'm out of wine…out of joy… I'm out!! Give me credit for what Jesus has done. Jesus has gone to the cross. Jesus has provided the wine. Jesus has shed his blood. **Jesus has lived the life I should have lived and died the death I should have died**. Now, for Jesus' sake, love me. Give me credit for what Jesus has done*." <u>And that's what it means to be a Christian</u>. If you don't understand that, you're always going to be anxious. You're not going to

experience wine…*it'll always be bread and water*. You're always going to be wondering whether you've lived a good enough life. No! No! Learn to say a saving prayer. Admit that you are out…admit that you need salvation…and ask for credit for what Jesus Christ has done…in other words, ask God to transfer to you what Jesus has done to your account.

- **Petitionary prayer.** You know what I love about this passage? Remember what I mentioned earlier about Reynolds Price's comment "*a lot of people are scratching their heads…'this seems so unworthy of Jesus…to use His divine power just to deal with a catering disaster.'"* Do you realize what this means? When you really love someone, you care about the little things in their life. You care about little inconveniences… little things that are clearly hurting them…or wringing their heart… making them feel downcast that day. If you really love someone you don't just care about the big things…you care about the little things as well. Jesus Christ did not think it was a poor use of His divine power and precious time…did not think it was a bad use of His time…to '*wipe egg off the face'* of two disorganized teenagers. That's what you've got here. Two disorganized teenagers who are basically going to be embarrassed for a while. Does Jesus say, '*I've got bigger fish to fry! I'm the incarnate Son of God…I'm down here to save the world…gimme a break*?!' He never does that! Of course not…He loves them. *And if Jesus Christ, comes into your life, with omnipotent power, and yet shows love that detailed…with that kind of care for you, I don't know what you should be afraid of*. So, go to Him with little things. Don't think there's anything too small to bring to Him. Don't say, 'oh, I can only go to Him with big things.' No…what this means is that He comes into your life and He cares about everything… every part. **So…go to him with everything**. Pray without ceasing

- **Patient prayer.** Look**…**Mary goes to Jesus with a reasonable

request…*'could you help me with this problem*.' First, He yells at her, "Woman!" Secondly He says something which is totally cryptic and confusing…"My time is not yet come." Third…He sends everyone off to fill the ceremonial jars with water—which seemingly has nothing to do with the problem. **There you have a beautiful picture of the future of your Christian life**. Year after year you're going to ask God for things… and He's either going to seemingly brush you off, **<u>or</u>** say confusing things to you, or just fill your life with tasks that you think have nothing to do with what you really need. This is your future!! So respond the way Mary responded…because, what does Mary do? What a lot of us do, we get in a huff, saying: '*I work my fingers to the bone for you Jesus, and what thanks do I get*.' That's what a mother can often do: '*You little…I wiped your nose…I wiped your behind, I'M YOUR MOTHER! You don't have any right to talk to me like that*.'

Oh, yes He does. You know why? ***She remembers the angels***. She remembers there are infinities and immensities in Him that have not yet been revealed. What looks to you like red herrings…things He's sending into your life that you are sure you don't need. YOU need to remember the angels…YOU need to remember who He is, and you need to do what Mary did! What exactly does she do? He's abrupt to her…He's harsh to her…He's seems to be brushing her off…He's confusing…***so what does SHE do***? She says, "do whatever He says." Whether it makes sense or not…whether it fits into your agenda or not…do whatever He says…and remember the angels. When you're in trouble…when everything is going wrong…you're filled with disappointment and you're ready to give up…or even give up on God, **just do…*whatever* He says**. Remember the angels. Follow Mary. Be patient.

- **Perspective prayer.** *Jesus deals with the present by looking to the*

future. **For Him that meant constant sorrow…but for us it means power and joy**. Many years ago I heard Edmund Clowney [xliii] preach a sermon on this text, and at one point in the sermon he said this…and suddenly the entire passage made sense to me…actually the basis for this whole message: "*Jesus sat amidst all the joy sipping the coming sorrow so that today you and I can sit amidst all this world's sorrow sipping the coming joy*." The reason why Jesus…in the midst of all the happiness…was sad…was ***because He was living in the present…in light of the future***. But, Jesus sat amidst all that joy, sipping the coming experience…tasting the coming sorrow…so that you and I can sit in the midst of the worst sorrow…and handle it…because we're sipping…we're experiencing…tasting…to some degree, the coming joy. In fact, we've got a stability now because of that coming joy.

Every time you take the Lord's Supper…and the Spirit of God makes it real to you, you are getting an hors d'oeuvre…you're getting a foretaste of that incredible feast. You can apply this to marriage. There…Jesus Christ at a wedding…and He's not married yet…and He's got this kind of faraway look… Think about this…many of us are unhappy about marriage because we're not married and want to be. Many others of us are unhappy about marriage because we're in a marriage and it's not a good one…and that's a large portion of the human race. So, very often marriage is just…a source of great pain…but sit in the midst of your sorrow sipping the coming joy. **There is only one lover…there is only one spouse, who can really give your heart all that your heart needs, and He awaits you**. There is only one marriage feast that will really, really finally fulfill every fiber of your being, and it's guaranteed to you…it awaits you. Only if you sit…sipping that coming joy, will you be able to handle the great disappointment of a bad marriage. In fact, I must say, even those of us who are experiencing pretty good marriages, need to do

it…otherwise we'll put a burden on the spouse that no human being can possibly bear. We're going to make our spouse have to be practically perfect…because all our hopes and all of our happiness and all of our sense of self-worth come from that person…and that will destroy even a good marriage. ***Sit in the midst of this world… tasting that coming joy, and you will have something that will enable you to face anything***.

- **Presence prayer.** This entire passage is here to say, when you pray, don't just pray, '*give me this and give me that…help Mommy…help Daddy…help Aunt Gertrude*'…***go for the wine***. Stop settling for bread and water. Dwight Moody, a minister in Chicago in the late 1800s… his church was destroyed by the great Chicago fire of 1871. Many of his people's homes were destroyed by the fire. After that disaster, Moody went into a period of depression. For him, there was a great sense of weakness and despondency, and he couldn't lift it. As it would turn out, he was here…in New York City …raising money to rebuild homes and the church in Chicago , and he was praying:

Oh, Lord, become a reality to me. I'm on bread and water. ***Give me the wine***!" Interestingly enough, one day he recounts: "*One day in the city of New York … oh what a day…I can't describe it. I seldom refer to it. It's almost too sacred an experience to name. I can only say that I had such an experience of God's love that I had to ask Him to stop. I would not now be placed back where I was before that experience if you should give me all the world.*"

This is an amazing statement. What he was actually saying was, '*I was pretty happy…and then I became depressed…and then because of that depression…I had an experience of God's love…that was worth the depression to have. I would never want to go back to the way I was*

before.' Do you know anything of that? Do you know that wine? Isaac Watts wrote a hymn [xliv], the opening line of which goes like this:

The hill of Zion yields

A thousand sacred sweets,

Before we reach the heavenly fields,

Or walk the golden streets.

A thousand sacred sweets! Take responsibility…take some responsibility for your joy.

End Notes

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[1] Sinclair B. Ferguson, Introduction to **The Glory of Christ: His Office and Grace**, John Owen, Christian Heritage books, 2004

[2] **Morning and Evening: An Updated Edition of the Classic Devotional in Today's Language, Charles Spurgeon (Author) Roy H. Clarke (Editor) -Thomas Nelson Publishers (September 1994)**

[3] ***The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World***, a message delivered September 30, 2006 Desiring God National Conference

[4] Ephesians. 5:5 *For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.* (To be covetous is to be marked by inordinate desire for wealth or possessions or for another's possessions and therein a violation of the 10th commandment)

[5] 2 Corinthians 5:21 God made Him *(Jesus)* who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him *(Jesus)* we might become the righteousness of God. (Theologians often refer to this as the great exchange: Jesus gets my sin… I get His righteousness…or right standing before God the Father).

[6] 2 Cor. 8:9 *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*

[7] Genesis 30:1

[8] This will be covered on the Reading on Justice.

[9] "To build a great city for all people through a gospel movement that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice, and cultural renewal to New York City , and through it, to the world."

[10] And the sermon series on which this collection of Readings is based

[11] An opinion that has much to support it is that the "Chebar" was the royal canal of Nebuchadnezzar , the Nahr Malcha, the greatest in Mesopotamia , which connected the Tigris with the Euphrates , in the excavation of which the Jewish captives were probably employed.

[12] How appropriate the title of John Owen's classic work, *The Death of*

Death in the Death of Jesus Christ.

[13] Jesus and Saint Paul were both single.

[14] Numbers 11:1 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

[15] Colossian 1:17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

[16] It was considered perfectly legitimate when you had a newborn…and the baby wasn't the gender you wanted, which normally meant a girl…you could throw it out, and you just let it die of exposure

[17] Romans 5:5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.

[18] New International Version of the Bible

[19] John 3: 29-30 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.

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[i] Flannery O'Connor, ***The Complete Stories***, 30th printing, 1990, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., page 508.

[ii] Timothy Keller, ***Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism***, Dutton, February, 2008, 281pp.

[iii] Eugene H. Peterson, ***Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best***, InterVarsity Press, 1983, page 52.

[iv] Ibid, page 54.

[v] http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/biographies/the-divine-majesty-of-the-word

[vi] Henry F. Henderson, ***Calvin in His Letters***, (London: J. M. Dent

and Co., 1909), p. 68.

[vii] Dr. Donald Carson, to Eric Pubols, September 8, 2007 . Mark Driscoll has said, “whatever room Don Carson’s in, he’s always the smartest guy in the room,” thus giving more weight to Carson ’s comment about Keller’s preaching impact.

[viii] Keller gave an overview of the awesome and unconditional nature of God’s free and gracious love, summarized as “*God loved us just because He loved*, “in his sermon “Grace, Therefore Holy” from Deuteronomy 7:6-11

[ix] Xenos Christian Fellowship http://www.xenos.org/essays/indic.htm

[x] Kenneth Bailey, ***Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15*** (Concordia, 1992), 112.

[xi] Ibid

[xii] ***Oklahoma !*** was the first musical written by the team of composer Richard Rodgers and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II. The musical was based on Lynn Riggs' 1931 play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*.

[xiii] To paraphrase the “early church father” Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 225 AD), *just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so the teaching of “how a man is made right before God” is ever crucified between two opposite errors*. Tertullian meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These "thieves" can be called *moralism or legalism* on the one hand, and *hedonism or relativism* on the other hand. (Source: “The Centrality of the Gospel,” Tim Keller)

[xiv] ***Wise Blood*****,** Flannery O’Connor, (Farrar, 1962).

[xv] ***It is Finished***, James Proctor, Lyrics; Ira D. Sankey, Music.

[xvi]“Getting Religion,” by Mark Lilla, New York Times Magazine, September 18, 2005 (http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/magazine/18evangelical.html?

_r=2&pagewanted=all)

[xvii] From the "The Explosive *Power* of a New Affection," a sermon by *Thomas Chalmers* (1780- 1847) a pastor of the Scottish Church , a moral philosopher, political reformer and scientist.

[xviii] "A Wonderful Afterlife, but Must Share Bath ," by A.O. Scott, New York Times, September 16, 2005 .

[xix] Hope for New York (www.hfny.org) is an affiliate ministry of Redeemer Presbyterian whose mission is to provide volunteer and financial resources to organizations serving the poor and marginalized of New York City . HFNY's vision is for a city in which individuals and communities experience spiritual, personal, social and economic well-being through the demonstration of Christ's love. At last count, HFNY was connecting both volunteer and financial resources to 45 organizations serving the city.

[xx] ***Babette's Feast*** a 1987 Danish film directed by Gabriel Axel. The film's screenplay was based on a story by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), who also wrote the story which inspired the 1985 Academy Award winning film *Out of Africa*. It was also the first Danish film to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

[xxi] N. T. Wright, "Grave Matters," *Christianity Today* 42, no. 4, (April 6, 1998). Viewed online at http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/april6/8t4051.html

[xxii] ***Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*** was written by John Frederick Coots and Haven Gillespie, and was first sung on Eddie Cantor's radio show in November 1934.

[xxiii] Hauerwas, Stanley *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* Notre Dame Press, 1981. Dr. Hauerwas is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School and he holds a joint appointment with Duke Law School .

[xxiv] "Peer Ministers Lead Search for God in College Dormitories," by Marek Fuchs , New York Times, October 15, 2005 .

[xxv] ***Habits of the Heart*: *Individualism and Commitment in American Life*** by Robert Bellah, University of California Press , Jan 11, 1985 - 376 pages

[xxvi] **"You're Nobody till Somebody Loves You"** written by Russ Morgan, Larry Stock, and James Cavanaugh and published in 1944.

[xxvii] **From the Hymn, "Love Constrained to Obedience," William Cowper, 1731-1800**

[xxviii] ***It's a Wonderful Life*** is an American Christmas drama film produced and directed by Frank Capra (1946), that was based on the short story "The Greatest Gift", written by Philip Van Doren Stern in 1939, and privately published by the author in 1945. The film is considered one of the most inspirational and best loved movies in American cinema. the film stars James Stewart as George Bailey, a man whose imminent suicide on Christmas Eve brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched and how different life in his community would be had he never been born.

[xxix] ***Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin***, Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Eerdmans, February, 1996.

[xxx] ***The Book of Proverbs***, Bruce K. Waltke - Chapters 1-15 (2004) Chapters 16-31 (2005), Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing

[xxxi] ***On Beauty and Being Just***, Elaine Scarry, Princeton University Press, 2001.

[xxxii] ***The Gospel of John: Triumph Through Tragedy, John 18-21***, James Montgomery Boice, 1999 - Baker Publishing Group.

[xxxiii] For a more expansive treatment of social justice, see ***Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just***, Timothy Keller, Dutton, 256pp, 2010.

[xxxiv] ***The Cultural Contradictions Of Capitalism***, Daniel Bell, Basic Books; 1976; Hardcover: 301 pages.

[xxxv] The ***Times Literary Supplement*** in October 1995 said that ***The***

Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism *was* among the 100 Most Influential Books since the Second World War

[xxxvi] ***Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West****,* Lamin Sanneh, Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 2003.

[xxxvii] ***Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life***, Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, University of California Press, 1985, 376 pages.

[xxxviii] ***Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*** , Robert D. Putnam, Simon & Schuster, 2000, originally a 1995 essay entitled "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital."

[xxxix] "But Sam lay back, and started with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last has gasped: 'Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. ***Is everything sad going to come untrue?*****'"** Sam Gamgee to Gandalf, in ***The Lord of the Rings***, chapter 4, Book Six, J.R.R. Tolkien.

[xl] ***The Four Loves***, C. S. Lewis, Harvest Books, 1960

[xli] The Roman historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus makes reference to early Christians and possible reference to *their* ***leader*** in his work, ***Lives of the Twelve Caesars*** - twelve biographies of Julius Caesar and the first 11 emperors of the Roman Empire . The work, written in AD 121 during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, was the most popular work of Suetonius, at that time Hadrian's personal secretary, and is the largest among his surviving writings.

[xlii] "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to be Both Scriptural and Rational Doctrine," a sermon by Jonathan Edwards, preached at Northampton , Massachusetts and published at the desire of some of the hearers, in the year 1734, http://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/sermons/supernatural_light.html.

[xliii] Edmund Prosper Clowney (July 30, 1917 – March 20, 2005) was a theologian, educator, and pastor. Born in Philadelphia , Pennsylvania , he earned a Bachelor of Arts from Wheaton College in 1939, a Bachelor of Theology from Westminster Theological Seminary in 1942, a Master of Sacred Theology from Yale Divinity School in 1944, and a Doctor of Divinity from Wheaton College in 1966.

[xliv] Isaac Watts (17 July 1674 – 25 November 1748) was an English hymn writer, theologian and logician. He was recognized as the "Father of English Hymnody," credited with some 650 hymns. Many of his hymns remain in use today, and have been translated into many languages. **Full text**: The hill of Zion yields, A thousand sacred sweets, Before we reach the heavenly fields, Or walk the golden streets. Then let your songs abound, And every tear be dry; We're marching through Immanuel's ground, To fairer worlds on high.